

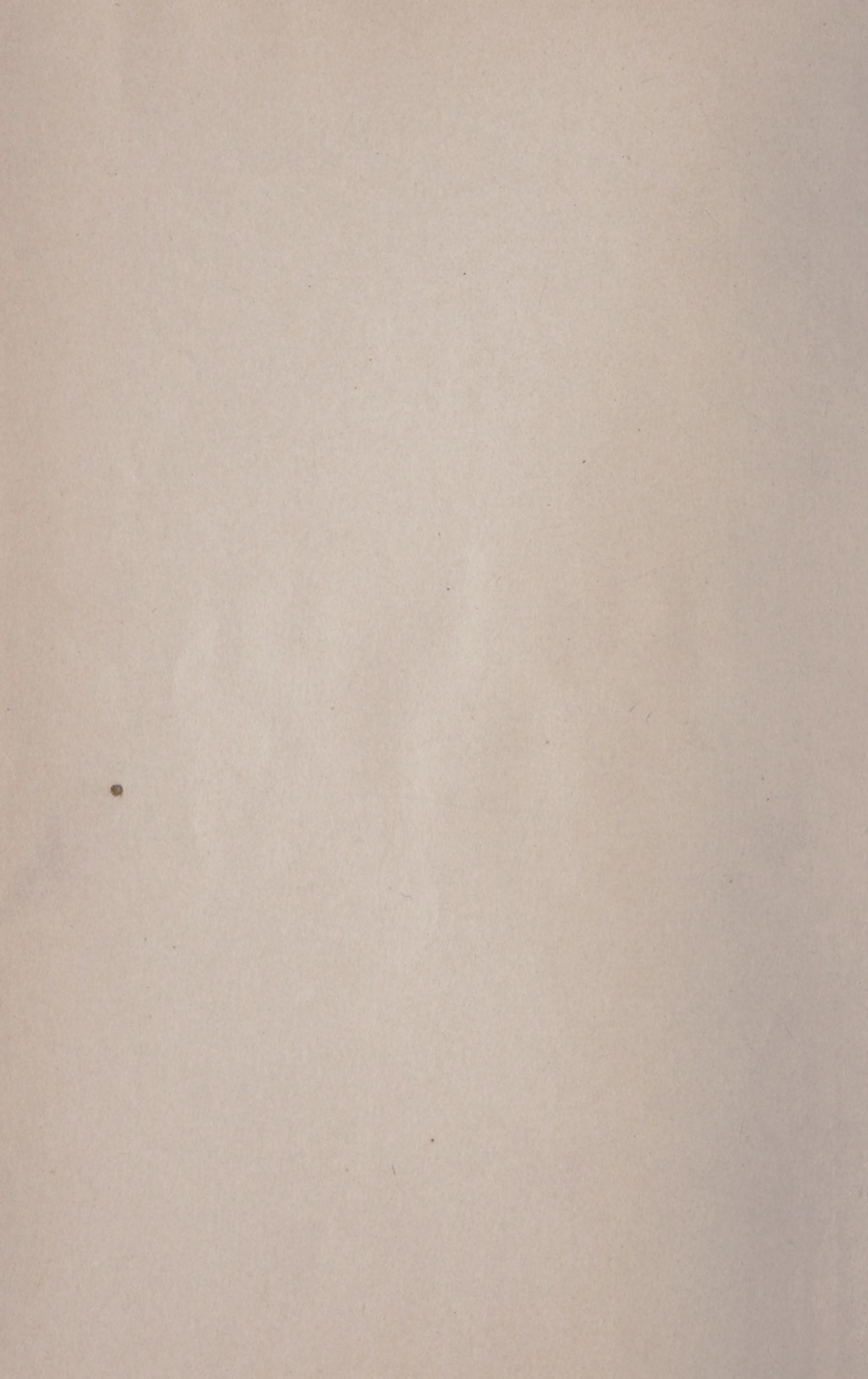
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A Hard Lesson

BY

E. LOVETT CAMERON.

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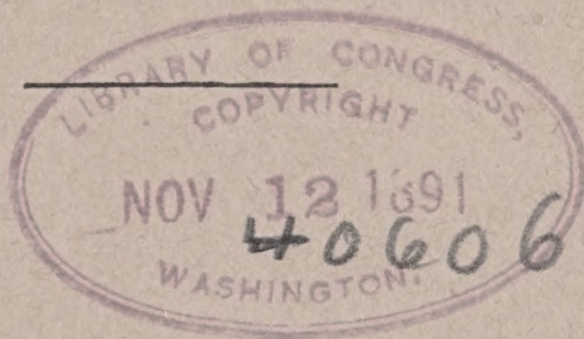
A HARD

LESSON

BY

Mary
E. LOVETT CAMERON

AUTHOR OF "THIS WICKED WORLD"; "A LIFE'S MISTAKE";
"DECEIVERS EVER," ETC., ETC.



NEW YORK

JOHN A. TAYLOR AND COMPANY

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A HARD LESSON.

CHAPTER I.

“HELEN!”

There was no answer. Miss Fairbrother glanced up at the old French clock on the high mantelshelf, then back at the crouching figure in the window-seat; but the bent brown head never moved. Miss Fairbrother waited a moment, and then she spoke again—in that quiet, well-balanced voice that was part of herself.

“Helen, my dear, if you are going to the station to meet Frederick, it is quite time for you to get ready.”

The girl lifted her head with a start. Her gray eyes were dazed and dreamy, her lips parted vaguely. Her mind was evidently far away, still wrapped up in the fortunes of the heroine of her book.

“I—I beg your pardon, Miss Fairbrother. Did you speak to me?”

“I called your attention to the hour, my dear. It is time for you to get your hat. I spoke twice,” added the old lady, with a gentle reproach.

Helen Dacre flushed a little guiltily, and rose hastily to her feet. She was a tall girl—tall and slight—with a small, thoroughbred head and a slender neck. There was something fine and distinguished about her; it was not exactly beauty, for her features were far from perfect, but there was a subtle grace in her movements,

and that nameless charm called fascination, which it is always difficult to define, but which produces often a more distinct effect, in its own way, than does actual beauty. For the rest, her eyes, which were her best point, were large, and of a deep shadowy gray, whilst her mouth was essentially womanly—that is to say, it was tender and tremulous, but a thought weak and irresolute in outline—a sweet mouth, with no very decided character about it.

As she rose hastily to her feet the novel she had been reading slipped with a little clatter on to the polished floor at her feet, whilst her hands—long-fingered, blue-veined hands, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds would have loved to paint—went up half nervously to smooth her ruffled, nut-brown locks.

“My dear, you have dropped your book,” said the old schoolmistress, reposingly. “Pray be more careful. How often I have told you.”

“I am sorry, Miss Fairbrother,” said Helen, almost mechanically, as she stooped to pick up the fallen volume. It was necessary to be “sorry” very often in Miss Fairbrother’s company; there were so many little things which jarred all day long against the good lady’s principles of order and propriety.

“I did not see that it was so late,” she continued, apologetically, as she came forward out of the window corner. “I will go at once.”

“I very much regret the infirmity which prevents my accompanying you in your walk, my love. Were it not for that, I should not, of course, allow you to go alone across the Common. It may, indeed, be an actual dereliction of duty on my part,” added the old lady, doubtfully; but Helen broke in quickly with a bright little smile—

"Pray do not distress yourself, dear Miss Fairbrother. I know you would come if you were a better walker; as it is, no harm can possibly happen to me."

"No, that is true, and then Frederick is so steady, so superior—so unlike all other young men—that I feel there can in this case be no impropriety in permitting you to walk alone with him."

"None whatever, I should think," replied Helen, somewhat drily, as she left the room.

When she was outside the door she laughed outright.

"Poor dear Miss Fairbrother!" she said, half aloud. "For two whole years she has said the same thing every time that Frederick is coming down! I suppose it is a salve to her conscience! But as to Frederick. Oh! *could* Frederick Warne say or do anything improper, under any provocation whatever, I wonder?"

Outside—beyond the high, red-brick walls, mellow with age and lichen, which shut in Miss Fairbrother's old-fashioned Georgian mansion within its peaceful garden precincts—lay the wide, breezy Common, glowing like a land of gold in the slanting rays of the setting sun. The gorse bushes were still powdered over with yellow blossom, whilst half-withered bracken fronds, of every shade, from deepest browns and crimsons to palest saffron, clothed the broad level space with the glory of the September coloring. All around the Common, but so far away in the tender evening light as not to be inharmonious to the landscape, circled a fringe of houses. Some, indeed, were smart new villas, with trim gardens in front of them, and white painted gates and railings, but mostly they were quiet old houses, nestling soberly amongst tufted trees, or hiding themselves in dignified seclusion behind old walls that had stood about them for a cen-

tury or more. Crossing the Common from north to south ran a fine white line—the high road that led from great London, not ten miles away, down into the peaceful heart of the country beyond; whilst at the far eastern corner of the heath, an incongruous blot upon the peaceful scene, was the railway station and its out-buildings.

It was something to be out of doors and to be free!—away from the shadow of the old red-brick house with its gray stone copings, and beyond its high walls and ponderous iron gates. Helen had never loved it. It had been her home for seven years; yet she had never ceased to regard it as a prison.

She remembered well the day when she had first come to it. Her father was dead. Her guardian, who was almost a stranger to her, and whom she had never seen since, had brought her down in a cab from London, and had delivered her over into Miss Fairbrother's charge. She was only thirteen—a lanky, awkward girl, with big, sad eyes, and a pale, solemn face. She had not shed a single tear—not one—only as the high wrought-iron gates had clanged harshly together behind her she had said to herself, in her desolate child's heart, that they were prison doors which were shutting her in for evermore from the stir and bustle and life of the world outside.

In all the years that had gone by she had never entirely lost that feeling—not even now, when she was twenty and no longer Miss Fairbrother's pupil, but her right hand and lieutenant in the school; when too, she was engaged to be married, and might reasonably expect to have a home of her own before very long.

Yet somehow freedom was the dream she still dreamt of—freedom to do as she liked, and go where she

pleased—to see the world as others did, to taste of its joys and its pleasures, of its sorrows even—so long only as she might extend her sphere of knowledge.

And this freedom after which she yearned so intensely did not seem likely to come to her in any fashion, or from any direction that she could possibly descry; no, not even through the door of marriage and through Frederick Warne.

Helen, when she got out upon the Common, well away from the shadow of Aberdare House, did not hurry herself in any way. On the contrary, she walked slowly and dreamily, as one who seeks to prolong the moments that are passing and is in no haste to squander them away. Her eyes were bent upon the ground, and all her thoughts were still full of that happy heroine of her story-book whose lot—full of tragic excitement as it was—seemed to her to be so infinitely enviable.

And yet she must have known that the train which was bringing Frederick Warne was even now due at the station.

Assuredly there was very little of the keenness of a woman who is beloved, and who goes forth eagerly to meet her lover, in her lagging footsteps!

It was the last day of the summer holidays. Tomorrow all the girls were coming back, and Aberdare House would be full of noise and chatter from attic to cellar. Then good-by to peace and to dreamy musings—to story-books and castles in the air! Helen sighed a little as she thought of it.

The evening sun behind her threw a long shadow of her tall figure in front of her, and so absorbed was she in her own thoughts as she walked slowly along, with her eyes bent upon its fantastic flickerings preceding

her along the grassy footpath, that it was with quite a start that, upon reaching the high road, she looked up suddenly to find herself within a few hundred yards of a very whirlwind of noise and commotion—a brilliant vision out of that unknown world of life and pleasure into which her lonely feet so often longed to enter.

A coach was coming rapidly along the road towards her. The yellow wheels whirled in the sunshine; a cloud of dust filled the air behind it; the four chestnut horses groomed into the shine of satin came trotting smartly along; there was a sound of clanking bars and bits, and of jingling harness, the even ring of hoofs and the rumbling of the heavy vehicle behind them, and, above all, the sound of merry voices and light laughter from the gay group of men and women who were seated together upon it.

Helen Dacre, upon the edge of the dusty road, stood still to watch this beautiful sight as it passed by. Gazing intently up into the faces above her, she saw a handsome man with blue eyes and an auburn mustache upon the box, and beside him a small, fair woman in a shining white dress, and a smart hat covered with pink roses. Behind them sat other happy-looking and well-dressed men and women, but these she did not see so well; it was the man who was driving and the lady by his side that filled her eyes in that brief moment which they flashed by her, and then the man, glancing carelessly aside, saw her too, and their eyes met.

In the days that were to come Gilbert Nugent was destined to remember that moment. The level Common, the golden glow of the sunset, and the slender, solitary figure of the girl in her shabby dress standing up, tall and graceful, in strong relief against the red light of the evening sky behind her formed a picture

whose strange and curious charm never quite faded from his memory.

In another moment the vision was over; the vague glimpse into an unknown future had vanished. The coach, with its spanking horses and gay load, was gone; and Helen, in her gray frock, stood alone by the roadside, looking somewhat sadly after the cloud of dust in which it was whirled away from her sight.

And she never even saw another lowlier vehicle which followed it along the road—a hansom cab with an elderly gentleman sitting inside it. And yet of the two, if she had but known it, the hansom ought to have been by far the most interesting to her.

By the time it passed Helen was away on the heath again, and a man carrying a Gladstone bag in his hand was advancing rapidly towards her along the grassy path.

“You are late, my dear. I was quite disappointed not to find you waiting upon the platform.”

Somehow the voice, the tone, the implied reproof were all exactly like Miss Fairbrother.

“I am here at any rate now,” answered the girl carelessly, as she shook hands and turned round with him.

Frederick Warne was Miss Fairbrother’s nephew—her dead sister’s son, and in the eyes of his aunt, at any rate, he was a very prince amongst men. Whatever might be the virtues of his character—and no doubt they were inestimable—as a man he was not much to look at. A pale, freckled complexion, sandy hair and eyebrows, and a short, ginger-colored beard and mustache, behind which the thin lips of a somewhat mean and obstinate mouth were but scantily concealed; narrow, stooping shoulders and a hollow chest; and that sort of shambling gait and figure upon which

a first-rate West-end tailor might have expended his whole energies in vain. Such was the outward appearance of the man whom Helen Dacre had promised to take for her lord and master! When they stood, as now, side by side, Warne was shorter than she was, and a casual passer-by would scarcely have taken them to belong to the same rank of life. And yet Frederick Warne was placidly and serenely unconscious of any shadow of disparity between himself and his promised wife. Indeed, if he had given any thought at all to the matter, it would have been unhesitatingly to pronounce the balance in his own favor. Helen, as his aunt was always telling him, was young and unformed. Her mind was ill-balanced, and all her good impulses came by fits and starts. But what a fortunate girl she was to be the chosen wife of such a one as Frederick Warne—so high-principled, so steady, and so richly endowed with all the cardinal virtues! Under such guidance, and with such a life's companion, Helen's faults must surely become eradicated, and her character derive strength and elevation. Miss Fairbrother often enlarged on this theme to him; indeed, she frequently told him that in a measure he was undoubtedly throwing himself somewhat away.

It was no wonder, perhaps, that the young man, in spite of half-hearted denials, really believed it to be the case. But he made excuses for Helen, and flattered himself that he was gifted with a mission—the mission to mould and to perfect the faulty nature of this attractive young girl who had confided her future to his hands.

Frederick Warne was a schoolmaster. In that statement, perhaps, lies the whole explanation of his character. A schoolmaster is by training, by habit, by the

natural force of the circumstances of his existence, more dictatorial, and more imbued with a sense of his own importance, and of the inferiority of other people, than any other man on earth.

It is perhaps unavoidable that he should be so. The constant habit of teaching, of correcting, and of suppressing those under his charge imparts to his whole moral nature an unconscious tinge of self-sufficiency. He feels himself to be a superior being, sent into the world purposely to set other people to rights. Being unaccustomed to contradiction, he is unable to brook it; that anybody should dare to differ from him, or to set up opinions in opposition to his own, strikes him as an impertinence—as a sacrilege almost; and it follows very often that the world, that is about to take us at our own valuation, smiles in its sleeve, and good-naturedly allows him to believe himself to be infallible.

CHAPTER II.

FREDERICK WARNE was classical master at a large middle-class grammar school in the north of London. When his duties at St. Matthew's permitted him to do so—that is, on the two half holidays of the week—he had been in the habit of coming down to his aunt's school on Cleares Common, in order to instruct the young ladies of her high-class establishment in the rudiments of the Latin language.

It was, perhaps, quite natural under the circumstances that Warne should have fallen in love with the tall, dark-eyed pupil-teacher, who shared the Latin lessons of the upper class, and whom he had watched grow from a shy child into a graceful, self-possessed woman. As far as in him lay he was honestly and genuinely in love with her. He admired her dark gray eyes and the turn of her well-shaped head. He said to himself, in his fatuous, underbred mind, that she "looked quite the lady," and that she would do him credit. And there were other things besides. She knew how to teach. She might help him in his career, and she had forty pounds a year of her own! Forty pounds regarded as an annual income is not perhaps much, but it is better than nothing. Very decidedly better! It would pay for her clothes, it would help to keep the domestic pot boiling. All things considered, he might go farther and fare worse.

For certain, in all his limited experience the poor young man had never come across anything half so

sweet and fair as Helen Dacre. It was small wonder that he should have coveted her for his own.

What was wonderful about the matter was that Helen should ever have been brought to consent to his proposal. The prospects he had to offer her were not brilliant. His annual earnings were scarcely larger than her own small pittance; he could not afford to marry her at once; it had to be a waiting engagement, and the marriage was to be indefinitely deferred until his position in the world should be bettered. He had nothing, therefore, to offer her save his own dull and ungainly self, and most assuredly she did not love him.

When he had made his proposal in due form, correctly and decorously, through the medium of his aunt—an event which had happened now nearly two years ago—a great many small things put together had induced Helen to give a reluctant consent to his offer. She was very tired of teaching. She fancied that marriage would mean an escape from her prison, and from Miss Fairbrother's incessant admonitions. The good lady herself was loud in expressions of delighted amazement at her wonderful good fortune, and urged her to accept so unspeakable a blessing as Frederick Warne's affections promptly, and with heartfelt gratitude. In fact, she refused even to listen to the small doubts which poor Helen attempted timidly to put forward, shutting her eyes and shaking her head in horror over them, as though they had been actual sins of the deepest dye. After she had spoken the fatal word Helen had certainly felt many degrees happier concerning her future, but did not experience much alteration in the conditions of her present.

Frederick Warne was not an ardent lover. His court-

ship was conducted upon the most matter-of-fact principles; and if passion ever found a place in his sluggish soul he was careful, from a sense of duty, to suppress every outward exhibition of it. After the few first days of bewildered surprise Helen learnt to be very grateful indeed that it was so.

The lovers met invariably, as they had met upon the Common to-day, with a quiet handshake and a few conventional inquiries after each other's health.

To-day, however, Frederick had something new to say to his ladylove—a great piece of news, which he proceeded in his slow and pedantic way to communicate to her.

“I have something of great importance to tell you, my dear Helen; something that may materially alter my whole future prospects,” he began.

“Indeed!” There was but a faint curiosity in her mind.

“I have been offered an appointment as classical master in the South London High School for Girls.”

“Really? Is it a good thing?”

“It would mean an increase of fifty pounds a year on my present income,” answered Frederick, with importance, “and a lodging free of rent attached to the building.”

“Should you live there, then?” inquired Helen, absently, with her eyes fixed upon the red-gold clouds in the western sky. Frederick Warne stopped short and faced her.

“I do not think you apprehend the importance of what I am saying, Helen. I had expected you to take a greater interest in my career, and to appreciate with keener intelligence the honor as well as the lucrative advantage which is to be given to me. With this

appointment I shall be in a position to marry and offer you a home next Christmas."

"Oh!" Helen was awake enough now. She turned on him two startled eyes. "Surely," she stammered, "surely that is very soon?"

"Soon! When our engagement has lasted two years! I thought you would have been glad," he continued, in a voice of mild reproach; "you do not seem glad at all."

"Forgive me," she murmured, confusedly. "I—I—was surprised. I am glad—I suppose." For the moment she felt genuinely penitent.

Frederick Warne looked at her coldly. "You express yourself badly," he said, in his formal schoolmaster voice, "and without self-control. It is wise always to reflect before uttering meaningless and broken remarks. We will talk of this matter again, when you are calmer, with my aunt."

He pushed open the iron gates for her, and Helen went in silently.

It is time to return to Miss Fairbrother. Soon after Helen had met her lover on the Common, the old schoolmistress, who had somehow fallen into a little doze by the chimney corner, suddenly became very wide awake and sat bolt upright in her chair as the maid-servant opened the door behind her and announced in a voice of due importance—

"The Earl of Bainton, m'am."

No more startling name could possibly have broken in upon her repose. It was now seven years ago since Lord Bainton had brought to her the little girl whom his old friend Colonel Dacre had left to his most reluctant guardianship. Years ago, when Miss Fairbrother was still brisk and active, and comparatively young,

she had been governess to Lord Bainton's sister; and when Lady Camilla Greyson heard that her bachelor brother had been saddled with a ward—a ward, too, with only forty pounds a year!—she had said to him in her off-hand way—

“Oh, take the child down to old Fairbrother's—she keeps a school now on Cleares Common. She will educate her for her forty pounds a year, and when she is old enough she can turn her into a pupil teacher, and she will earn her own living. In that way you need never be bothered with her any more.”

Lord Bainton had thankfully taken his sister's advice. Although a kind-hearted man, he was somewhat selfish and indolent. He liked his own ways and his own life, and anything more disconcerting to him than to find himself the guardian of a female child it would be difficult to imagine. He thought it, privately, very inconsiderate of poor Dacre to saddle him with such a bequest. Nevertheless, being a man of honor and of conscience, he felt himself compelled to do his duty by the child. He took Helen himself down to Aberdare House and confided her to the care of his sister's old governess.

Once a year he received a letter from Miss Fairbrother reporting his ward's progress, to which he invariably wrote an answer filled with polite and suitable, if somewhat meaningless, sentences; and when the time came for the girl to become a teacher instead of a pupil in the school, he notified his consent and approval of the change in her position. In addition, he administered her small fortune carefully and judiciously, and invariably sent her a five-pound note at Christmas-time as a present from himself. Lord Bainton could not conceive that his duties as a guardian

could possibly have been more conscientiously fulfilled.

That he should go down to Cleares Common and personally inspect his ward had never entered into the scheme of his obligations towards her. Nor would he for a moment have imagined that he would be benefiting her by doing so. Her position in life was bound to be a lowly one. She was probably happy where she was. Miss Fairbrother, at any rate, assured him that she was. Of what advantage, therefore, to unsettle her by visits which could necessarily lead to nothing? She could have nothing to say to him, and, most assuredly, he could have nothing to say to her. As he remembered her she had been awkward and ungainly; there had been nothing attractive at all about her. She had been a plain and dull child then; she was probably a plain and dull young woman now.

He had no desire whatever to renew his acquaintance with her. But now something totally unforeseen had occurred—something which had most materially altered the whole complexion of the case.

A great many years before the date of this history, there had been three friends together at Eton and at Oxford who had been absolutely inseparable in their devotion to each other. When they left college, and entered upon the battle of life, their paths had, as is generally the case, widely diverged from each other. Dacre went into the army and was ordered abroad, where he married a penniless girl, who died in her first confinement. Bainton in due course succeeded to his father's title and estates. George Ashworth, the third of the trio, went out to seek his fortune in Australia, purchased for a song a small property there, upon which he lived and prospered, and became eventually a rich man.

Of the three, James Dacre was the only one who married ; and when Ashworth returned, broken in health, to England to enjoy such pleasures as his wealth might still bring to him, he returned only in time to be present at Colonel Dacre's funeral, and to shake Lord Bainton's hand once more across the open grave of their mutual old friend. After that the two friends met often, and Ashworth was such a complete recluse, owing to the fatal disease which had already undermined his life, that he scarcely saw any one else. He had one nephew—the son of a sister who was dead—and to this nephew he conceived an unconquerable dislike. Yet those about him took it for granted that this nephew would necessarily become his heir. Perhaps the young man himself took it for granted, too, and showed that he did so too plainly. Anyhow, when the end came, as, after seven years of a long and painful illness, it came at last, George Ashworth's will was a complete surprise to everybody save his solicitor. The Earl of Bainton was named his sole executor, with a legacy of two valuable Gainsboroughs and some sketches by Turner, which he had always admired. To the nephew was left five hundred pounds and a portrait of his mother by an inferior artist. The whole of the rest of his fortune was devised, unconditionally and unreservedly, to a person whom he had heard of—but had never seen—Colonel James Dacre's orphan daughter. Now this was the astonishing news which Lord Bainton had driven down all the way from town in a hansom to impart to the schoolmistress at Aberdare House.

The story, wonderful as it was, took but a very few minutes to tell, and soon Miss Fairbrother was in possession of the main facts of the case.

Somebody—the good lady hardly knew who, save that he was an old friend of her father's—had died and left Helen thirty thousand pounds.

Poor Miss Fairbrother gasped for breath over the news.

“But—but,” she panted, “how is it possible—when he never saw her—never heard of her?”

“Pardon me; he had heard of her often. He used to inquire about her from me.”

“And yet you left her here, Lord Bainton! A pupil-teacher in my school! You never informed me that she would require special teaching and training, so that she might be rendered fit to become the possessor of a large fortune?”

“You misjudge me, Miss Fairbrother. Naturally, I knew nothing whatever of my poor friend's intentions with regard to his money. Had I been aware of them I should certainly not have left Helen here so long. However, I am persuaded that my ward will do credit to your care and training”—this Lord Bainton added with a bow and a polite smile—“and so now that it has become my duty to remove her to a wider sphere of life I shall do so with all confidence in you, and in any case her future is before her, and no harm has been done.”

CHAPTER III.

It was at this moment that Miss Fairbrother suddenly recollected Frederick Warne.

By a singular omission in her letter to Helen's guardian she had never informed him of his ward's engagement. Lord Bainton had taken apparently so little interest in the girl, and had evidently desired to have so little personally to do with her, that she had always supposed when the time came he would be glad enough to learn she had found a respectable and suitable husband who would take her entirely off his hands. Somehow she had kept the little secret religiously from him, not knowing quite, perhaps, at the very bottom of her heart, how he might take it, and yet not doubting, either, that it would be easy to obtain his consent when Frederick's prospects should enable him to fix a date for his marriage.

Now for the first time Miss Fairbrother's conscience troubled her, while at the same time her worldly anxiety for her nephew's advantage led her secretly to rejoice; for how was this miraculous turn of the wheel of Fortune going to affect her nephew?

"It is all for the best," she told herself. "How was I to know that the girl would be an heiress? They can't blame me. Of course, had I known it, I would not have allowed Frederick to pay his addresses to her. But, there, it can't be helped now; and what a splendid match for dear Frederick, to be sure!"

"I should like to see my ward," here said Lord Bain-

ton. "You have never described her to me, Miss Fairbrother. Tell me what she has grown into—what is she like?"

Miss Fairbrother shook her head doubtfully—

"She is very unformed still—you must not be too critical, Lord Bainton."

This was not promising. The earl, who had a keen eye for beauty, felt disheartened.

"She was an ungainly looking child, I remember," he remarked dubiously.

"She is very much what she was, I fear. Everything with Helen is by fits and starts. She is impulsive—she lacks self-control. Sometimes she is abstracted and inattentive to what might improve her mind; sometimes she expresses her opinions crudely and unbecomingly for a young girl."

Lord Bainton laughed. "Oh, never mind her impulses and her opinions—I don't care a fig about that, Miss Fairbrother. What are her face and shape like?—that is what is of most importance to a woman in the world, you know!"

At such a horrible and heterodox sentiment the schoolmistress shuddered. Here was, indeed, an upheaval of all her most sacred and cherished doctrines! She, who for fifty years of a long and honored career had preached from the self-same text to succeeding generations of maidens: "Be good—be orderly—behave decorously. Never mind what your face is like so long as your principles are unassailable and your mind is modest and well stocked with Christian virtues. To be good is better than to be pretty."

She had always impressed it upon them all, and perhaps they had believed her, while they were with her; but then they had gone their ways into the wicked

world without, and the wicked world had speedily taught them—the pretty ones particularly—quite a different kind of lesson!

Still, Miss Fairbrother had gone perseveringly on with her little stereotyped sermon. And to-day she was told by a man—an old man too, who ought to have known better—that a girl's face and shape were of more importance to her than her mind!

Fortunately she was saved from the necessity of a reply to so terrible a statement, for the door opened, and Helen herself entered, her tall and slender form concealing the shorter figure of the man who followed her through the doorway.

"Here is Helen, Lord Bainton," said Miss Fairbrother. "Helen, this is your guardian, Lord Bainton."

Lord Bainton rose to his feet. Amazement, bewilderment even, followed quickly by unbounded delight and admiration, coursed rapidly across his keen and wrinkled features. He flushed a little as he held out his hand to her. Nothing had astonished him so much for many years. The little, long-legged, gawky girl of thirteen, with heavy eyes and pale cheeks, with rough, lustreless locks and homely and irregular features, had disappeared. In her place there stood before him a tall and graceful woman—a woman with bewildering eyes and a delightful smile, with a rose flush upon the delicate cream tints of a rare and beautiful complexion, and with a head which she carried like a young queen. Such a metamorphosis had surely never been carried out before, thought Lord Bainton, in his surprise and delight—wherein he showed his ignorance of the curious and complex nature of female children; for often the awkwardest and ugliest girls turn with a mys-

terious suddenness into the handsomest and gracefulest of women.

What a fool he had been, to be sure, to neglect her so long! What a flower she was—to have been allowed to blossom unseen till her twenty-first year in this wilderness! And then he saw her, too, through the glow of her new fortune, and that also helped, no doubt, to turn the scales in her favor in his mind.

“My dear,” he said, bending low over her slender, long-fingered hand, and raising it with old-fashioned gallantry to his lips, “you positively amaze me! What fairy godmother has turned the ugly little girl I remember into the charming young woman I see before me now?”

No one in her whole life had ever told Helen that she was “charming” before. Miss Fairbrother never mentioned beauty in a woman, save to remark, with disparaging contempt, that it was “a snare”; while the lover, who should have worshipped at her shrine, had a fixed idea that a woman should be useful and dutiful, and that all braidings and adornings of her perishing person ought to be religiously eschewed. Frederick had kept any admiration he might have secretly felt for Helen’s personal appearance strictly to himself—no doubt lest he should corrupt her mind with vanity and so render her unfit to imbibe his own improving words with due and becoming humility.

No sweet and flattering words had ever fallen upon Helen’s ears from the lips of the man who had chosen her to be his. Words which endear a man to a woman’s heart, even though they be foolish and unreal, because by them she learns that, whatever she may be to all the world besides, she is at least fair in his eyes.

The old man bowing over her hand was the first who

had ever told her that she possessed the power to please by her face alone.

She threw a rapid, frightened glance from one of her jailers to the other. Miss Fairbrother looked disapproving, but somewhat helpless, while Frederick was fairly and frankly angry. Poor Helen felt she would be made to pay for this by-and-by.

"You—you are too kind," she stammered to her guardian. "I am afraid you—you flatter me."

"Not at all, my dear; not at all! A great many people will tell you what I do. If I had only known what my ward was like! But there, I am the loser! and now I must make up for lost time. I am the bearer of a very important piece of news for you, my dear Helen," and then catching sight for the first time of Frederick Warne's shambling figure in the background, Lord Bainton turned to Miss Fairbrother, still retaining Helen's hand in his own, "I should like to see my ward alone, or with you only present. Miss Fairbrother, perhaps you will ask this gentleman if he will kindly leave us?"

There was a moment of embarrassment. Miss Fairbrother rose to her feet. She trembled a little.

"I ought to introduce you, Frederick. This, Lord Bainton, is my dear nephew, Frederick Warne."

Lord Bainton bowed. "Delighted to make Mr. Warne's acquaintance," he said, with a certain impatient hauteur. "I am sure Mr. Warne will understand that I have a communication of a private nature to make to my ward—and that he will kindly——"

"You can have nothing to say to Miss Dacre, my lord, which does not concern me," interrupted Warne sternly. "Miss Dacre's affairs are mine."

Lord Bainton lifted a double eyeglass, which depended

from a thin gold chain over his waistcoat, and fixing it upon his nose, he looked at Frederick Warne.

This action of his had been known to have an exceedingly disconcerting effect upon its subject. Frederick, probably because he was a schoolmaster, was not at all disconcerted. He merely turned to his aunt.

"Have you explained my position to Lord Bainton, aunt?" he inquired.

"No, not yet, my dear. I—I have not had time. I was about to do so, but—" Helen had never seen Miss Fairbrother so upset and so nervous.

"I will explain things myself to you, my lord," said Frederick, turning to Lord Bainton. "The fact is, I am engaged to your ward, and intend to be married to her at Christmas."

Lord Bainton was a thorough man of the world. To say that he was not taken aback—and very considerably so—would be untrue; but he was gifted with great resources, and to knock nuder before such a blow as this was not in him. Moreover, he had the wisdom of the serpent, and was not going to waste his breath in superfluous indignation. He settled his eyeglasses more firmly upon his nose, and replied:

"Oh, indeed?—very kind of you, I am sure." Frederick in sober earnest believed that it was very kind indeed of him to express himself ready to marry such an insignificant person as Helen Dacre, so that Lord Bainton's sneer did not wither him up in the way which that great man intended it to do. He replied with a proud modesty:

"Having given my word to Miss Dacre, and being now in a position to marry, I am, of course, ready to fulfil my promises toward her."

"Most kind of you!" repeated Lord Bainton fer-

vently. "There is, however, I might remind you, sir, a slight formality which you seem to have overlooked. I am Miss Dacre's guardian, and until she is twenty-one, Miss Dacre cannot marry without my consent. Miss Fairbrother has not thought fit to inform me of this interesting intention of yours."

"Indeed, indeed, Lord Bainton," cried the poor lady in much distress, "I never for one moment supposed that you would disapprove of my nephew, or withhold your consent to Helen's marriage to him. He is a most excellent and high-principled young man—who bears, I assure you, an unblemished character—and, of course, as things were—"

"Yes, my dear madam—no doubt; but as things are, all such arrangements must necessarily be set aside. Mr.—Mr. Warne?—ah, yes, Mr. Warne will understand, I am sure, that things cannot be so satisfactorily settled for him as he seems to anticipate, when I inform him that Miss Dacre has been left a large sum of money, and now holds a totally different position in the world to that which she has hitherto done."

Helen uttered a little cry. She turned from one to the other, with a bewildered air, for a moment or two. She turned very pale, and the room seemed to whirl round with her.

Lord Bainton pressed her hand and smiled reassuringly at her. "There is nothing to alarm you, my dear. But your responsibilities are now increased. You must think things a little over before I can allow you to bind yourself to this gentleman. You must see the world. I have come to take you away. I want to introduce you to my sister, Lady Camilla Greyson. You must mix a little in society, and learn to know your own mind."

"No mixing in society, no knowledge of the world, ought to suffice to alter your duty toward me, Helen," said Warne, in a voice hoarse with unwonted agitation. "You have promised to marry me. I was ready to take you with nothing, or next to nothing. Wealth can make no difference to you—your duty is the same—"

"We will leave duty out of the question, if you please, Mr. Warne," said Lord Bainton coldly. Then turning with a smile toward Helen, he drew her kindly toward him.

"My dear child, you shall do exactly as you like. If you prefer to stay with your friends here, you shall, of course, do so. On the other hand, if you go upstairs now and pack up your box, I will wait for you till you are ready, and I will take you back to London with me. I have sundry plans for your future life in my mind; and, in the first instance, I wish to introduce you to my sister, who will meet us in town to-morrow. Come; which will you do—stay here? or go with me?"

Helen stood with downcast eyes and a beating heart. Her color went and came. She looked a picture of charming irresolution. She was not really irresolute a bit. She had made up her mind instantly.

She was rich! What a world opened out before her at the very word! Life, and its unknown pleasures and delights—the life she had longed to taste—the joys she had read of in books, but had often thought were never to be hers! And freedom, too—freedom from drudgery and dulness and hard work! Oh! what a great and wonderful thing was this money that was to bring her all this! And what a veritable fairy prince was this delightful old gentleman, who had come to carry her away into fairyland! Only she must not seem unkind or ungrateful. So, though her eyes shone

and her cheeks glowed with delight, it was in the demurest voice in the world that she answered at last—

“You must not think me unkind, Frederick, or ungrateful to you, dear Miss Fairbrother, but”—putting her hand timidly into her guardian’s—“but, if you please, I should like to go with you, Lord Bainton.”

CHAPTER IV.

LATE in the afternoon of a still, gray day in the following January, two ladies were seated, silently, one on either side of the hearth, in the oak-panelled hall of an old country house in Meadowshire. Although it was nearly five o'clock, and quite dark out of doors, they had, as yet, no other light save the warm glow of the flickering fire between them, which cast fantastic shadows upon the deer's antlers and ancient weapons that hung upon the sombre walls, upon the tiger skins and eastern rugs stretched upon the polished floor, and upon the quaint cabinets and bureaus which were ranged at intervals around the room. At the farther end, opposite the fireplace, a wide staircase, with a heavily carved oak balustrade, stretched dimly upward into the gloom above; while two figures in armor, one on either side, at the base of it, seemed to keep watch over the stillness, and harmonized weirdly with the old-world surroundings over which they presided.

Between the two ladies, whose dresses reflected the firelight, but whose faces were in the shadow, a little modern tea-table, set out with pink-and-white cups and saucers, had been placed; but this frugal meal was evidently quite over, for the cups were empty, and all the bread and butter eaten up.

Presently, from some shadowy corner behind them, where a tall French marqueterie clock had stood ticking life solemnly away for generations, five o'clock rang

out, with clear and bell-like chimes, into the stillness of the house.

"Five o'clock!" exclaimed the lady to the right of the fire, sitting up a little in her chair, so that the red light caught her face, which was small and fair and delicate. "How you do love this owl's light, Camilla! How silent we have been!—will they not soon be here?"

"Not for another half hour," answered the other, in a deep, full voice. "Although, perhaps, we had better have the lamps, and I can order some fresh tea to be made for them," and Lady Camilla put forth her hand to touch the bell.

"Do they come only from town to-day?"

"No; straight through from Paris."

"And what is she like?"

"Well, you know, I have only seen her once. It was in September. My brother telegraphed to me to meet him in town. I went up, and found them at the Alexandria Hotel—the house in Portman Square was shut up. He had just brought her up from the school where she had been living. I only stayed the night. Bainton wanted me to take her off his hands—so like a man, you know; anything to save themselves trouble. It annoyed me at the time. I thought it so selfish of him and I refused. Now, I wish—!" and she rounded off the sentence with a sigh.

"You wish that you had kept the game in your own hands?" suggested Mrs. Torrington, with a little laugh.

"Exactly," replied her hostess, without, however, a shadow of laugh in her answer.

The servants came in with the lamps—the old hall became illumined with a mellow radiance. When the men had removed the tea things and had retired, Mrs. Torrington repeated, with gentle persistence:

"Well, but what was the girl like? Is she pretty?"

"Not exactly. Although she has fine eyes and a good figure; it is more a look of distinction."

"Is not that strange, as she is a nobody?"

"Not altogether. Colonel Dacre was a man of excellent family, although who his wife was, is more than I can tell you."

There was another little silence. Mrs. Torrington, who was a pretty little woman of about five-and-thirty, with a pink-and-white rosebud face, and fair fluffy curls, which made her look much younger than her age, warmed her small toes reflectively, holding them out one after the other to the blazing logs upon the hearth.

"And you think that Bainton will—?" she began at last, slowly and inquiringly.

Lady Camilla sprang to her feet with an exclamation of impatience.

"How can I tell what Bainton will or will not do, my dear? I only know that he is infatuated with the girl! He has devoted himself to her for three months; giving up his hunting in order to take her about half over Europe. The Wiltons travelled with them for propriety's sake, I suppose; though why, when a man is sixty years of age, he may not go about with a girl of twenty, unattended by a *chaperone*, is more than I can understand. And then his letters about her! You should see them—pages of ravings! I never knew Bainton take so much trouble, or get so excited about anything in petticoats before. It is hard, when I've looked upon him as a confirmed bachelor for years, and he almost told me that Teddie was to be his heir—as, of course, he ought to be."

"Miss Dacre has thirty thousand pounds, has she not? Your brother can't want her money—he has plenty."

"Oh, it's not her money, of course."

"Still, it seems a pity not to keep it in the family. Can't you marry her to Teddie?"

"Don't be foolish, Dora. Teddie is sixteen. Of course, if he had only been older, it would have been the thing to do. But, thank heaven, the case is not yet hopeless. That is why—"

"That is why you have offered the heiress a home?"

"Yes. And naturally Bainton won't stay here long—he and Tom don't get on, you know. When I get her here alone, I shall probably be able to manage something. In fact, I have a little idea already."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Torrington's heart began to beat. She knew quite well what Lady Camilla's little idea was.

The elder woman cast a furtive glance at her. Dora Torrington was her husband's cousin. She was a widow, and she was poor. Lady Camilla had always liked her and been kind to her. When Dora had nowhere else to go, Old Park was always open to her. But in many ways Lady Camilla disapproved of her cousin by marriage. There were things about her life she hated, and would gladly have seen altered. Yet, somehow, Dora, though she was so small, and fair, and childish-looking, and though she was a good fifteen years and more younger than her own mature self, was a person with whom it was very difficult to interfere. That was why Lady Camilla looked at her askance now, and hesitated to say what was in her mind. Mrs. Torrington would not help her. She sat obstinately silent, staring into the flames. Although her heart beat, she was outwardly quite calm and composed. Of course she knew what was coming. Had they not been fencing round and about this subject the whole afternoon?

As Lady Camilla meant to speak, she had to do so at last unassisted.

"I thought about Gilbert Nugent," she said.

"Naturally you did," replied Dora, still staring into the fire.

Lady Camilla breathed a little more freely.

"Well, my dear, I am sure I am very glad you say so. We all feel that poor Gilbert was badly treated, and that this money of old Ashworth's ought to have been his. I really do think it would be the most natural thing in the world if we could bring about a marriage between him and the girl who had defrauded him of his fortune."

"You are so clever, Camilla! The scheme is quite too charming! I only see two objections to it. To begin with, Gilbert hates girls."

"Oh! my dear," laughed Lady Camilla, "that sort of phase never lasts. Where a new influence arises in a man's life, those kind of fancies don't go for much—if that is all!"

"No; it is not all. You forget that I mentioned another objection."

"So you did. What is it?"

"That Gilbert Nugent belongs to me."

Lady Camilla positively stamped. "How angry you do make me, Dora, by such a remark as that! How *can* a man, who is neither your husband nor your lover, nor even your cousin, be said to 'belong' to you? In what sense, pray, does he 'belong' to you?"

Mrs. Torrington laughed aloud. "You will be the death of me, Camilla. Pray don't look so shocked. I am going to say something far worse. I have got a lease of Gilbert Nugent—a lease of ten years!"

"How perfectly disgusting! I do not understand

your meaning in the very slightest. Perhaps, indeed, I had better not inquire."

"Oh, yes, indeed you may. I am going to explain to you. It is perfectly proper, I assure you."

"Go on," said Lady Camilla, coldly and severely.

"Seven years ago—" began her cousin,

"That is, when Gilbert Nugent was twenty-one, and the breath was only just out of poor Jim Torrington's body."

"Exactly. Pray don't interrupt me. Seven years ago, Gilbert Nugent gave me a written promise on paper—which I possess now—that he would not marry anybody for the space of ten years, on the chance of either of us coming into enough money to enable us to marry one another. After that period has elapsed, he is free to do as he likes."

"How thoroughly ridiculous! Do you call yourself engaged to him, then?"

"Certainly not. It's not an engagement. It is a covenant."

"But you will never have any money—either of you—now that his only chance is lost, and his uncle has left him nothing!"

"Never. You are perfectly right."

"Then you will never marry him?"

"Never. I do not expect to. Only there are three years more of our lease to run, and I don't mean to let him go till they are expired!" answered Mrs. Torrington, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Well, of all the cruel, selfish, wicked arrangements I ever heard of!" exclaimed Lady Camilla indignantly. "Of what possible use can it be to you to keep that wretched young man bound to you in such a fashion?"

"Of every use. Gilbert is handsome and popular. Although he has barely sufficient income to keep himself in clothes, he goes everywhere. He drives and rides other men's horses, shoots other men's game, fishes in other men's rivers, and does it all better than anybody else. I like having such a man in attendance on me, for when I am present he always devotes himself to me—"

"And yet he is not in love with you!"

"Not in the least—*now*. But he is fond of me—and—he is of use to me."

"And for that you would stand in his light, and prevent him from making a happy marriage?"

"Of course. Why not? Am I not as important in the economy of creation as Gilbert Nugent? Why should I put myself on one side for him?"

Then Lady Camilla Greyson made one of the truest observations she had ever given utterance to in her life.

"Then, my dear," she said, "you certainly cannot love him very much."

"Perhaps not," answered Dora a little bitterly, after a moment's pause. "What is the use of wasting love on a man? One gives them gold—they pay one back in silver-gilt! We self-abnegate ourselves in a life's devotion—and they tire of us in a few years! Oh, my dear Camilla, you are older than I am, but I have lived far longer and learned far more! Your dear, good Tom never, I am sure, gave you a moment's anxiety. You do not know what it is to harden and harden day by day, year by year, till one is as hard as granite!"

"But, Dora, that is very wrong."

"Very likely. Everything is wrong. Life is wrong. Love is more wrong than all else. One ought to begin where one ends—in impassibility!"

There was a moment's silence. The tall clock ticked on evenly and drearily. The logs fell in with a little crash. Lady Camilla thought about Lord Bainton's infatuation for Helen Dacre and her Eton boy's threatened prospects, and Dora Torrington sat looking for a moment dumbly and blindly into the dead ashes of her lost youth.

Perhaps an angel had passed by, touching her soul with a passing warmth; but, if so, the holy visitant's stay was short. With a little shiver she roused herself; the dream light went out of her blue eyes, the sad and bitter curve from her rose-tinted lips, she shook her head as though to banish unavailing thought, and turned gayly to her cousin.

"So you see, Camilla, it will be wise to leave our mutual friend out of your calculations. I can't possibly help you in making matches for Gilbert Nugent!"

"It is very selfish of you, Dora, and very useless, too," replied Lady Camilla, crossly. "Because if Gilbert falls in love with Miss Dacre, or with anybody else, your written promise will become so much waste paper. When the temptation comes to him then you will see."

"Oh, Gilbert is very loyal. He never walks into temptation, and I take great care never to send him into it."

"Ah, well; we shall see next week," remarked Lady Camilla, airily.

"How do you mean—next week?"

"He is coming here. I have invited him."

"To meet this heiress?"

"No; to meet *you*, of course!" was the mocking answer.

There followed a moment during which Dora Tor-

rington hated her cousin's wife with all her heart and soul.

But before she could find words to express her anger and indignation, there came a sound of carriage wheels advancing rapidly toward the house.

"Here they are!" cried Lady Camilla, springing to her feet; then, holding out her hand to her companion, "Come, Dora, don't be cross. I dare say Nugent won't like the girl at all; only *do* help me to turn Bainton's mind from her. Flirt with him yourself if you like. Only think what a calamity it would be if he married, and poor Ted were to be cut out! Do, like a good girl, stand by me."

"Why should I? Do your worst," answered Dora somewhat tragically.

"On the contrary, I shall do my best," replied her hostess. "Ah! my dearest brother, here you are at last." She hurried forward to the open door which the servants had flung widely open, and through which there entered Lord Bainton, in a thick coat, with a travelling cap tied over his ears, followed closely by a tall and slender girl, wrapped in a long rich fur mantle. Her face was a little pale; her large eyes peered from the darkness without a little eagerly and anxiously into the warmly lit hall; and at her heart there was a vague tremor, which she could not account for or understand, at finding herself at last at the home of her guardian's sister.

Thus it was that Helen Dacre on that chill January evening crossed the threshold of the house where the story of her life was destined to be played out.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Helen looked out of her bedroom window the next morning she saw before her the undulating slopes of the park, dotted with fine trees and crowned with the brown and leafless woods which surrounded the old house.

Old Park, like three fourths of the Tudor houses of England, lay low in the shelter of a gentle hollow, with round, swelling hills on every side of it. It was a solid-looking house, forming three sides of a square, and built of gray stone, with mullioned windows and heavy chimney stacks. All round it were terraced gardens, divided into partitions by close-trimmed yew hedges, cut at intervals into quaint shapes of birds and beasts. The gardens were empty now, and the brown beds, denuded of their summer glories, lay dreary and lifeless beneath the leaden winter skies. A dull mist hung over the distant woods and in the hollows of the park. Helen, who had heard much about the beauty and grandeur of Lady Camilla's home, drew back from the window with a sense of disappointment. She recalled the blue skies of Italy, beneath which she had been lately wandering as in fairyland, and wished herself back there; and she shivered a little as she turned her eyes away from the misty landscape. Curiously enough, she thought at that moment of something which for nearly four months she had cleverly contrived almost to forget altogether. She thought about Frederick Warne. Her life was so entirely altered

that she had succeeded lately in forgetting him altogether. The excitement of her sudden access of wealth—the rapid changes of scene she had undergone—the surprise and delight of finding herself no longer a despised, dependent pupil-teacher, but a person of importance to whom many people were attentive and all were kind and flattering—had produced a great and wonderful change in Helen's mind and character. It seemed to her that she had realized at one stroke all the vague and suppressed aspirations of her girlhood. Like some earth-crawling worm she had shed her poor and humble skin, and had emerged, as though by miracle, into the radiant brilliancy of a beautiful butterfly. When she thought about it, it seemed to her that she was not the same person at all, but that her very identity was gone and that she had been transformed into somebody else.

As to Frederick Warne, he had faded into nothingness. Lord Bainton had never spoken to her about him. With the worldly wisdom for which he was remarkable, the old man had merely observed to her as they drove away together from Aberdare House—

“Now, my dear child, you have left all that kind of thing”—indicating the schoolhouse and its inhabitants with a backward jerk of his yellow thumb—“behind you for ever. You are to begin a new life altogether from this very day.”

And he never alluded in the most distant fashion to the unlucky classical master or to her unfortunate position with regard to him.

So she had done what was simplest, and easiest, and pleasantest to herself about him—she had forgotten him. Why—on this first day at her new English home, at which it had been arranged that she was to spend

six months of the year, and the remaining six months under the care of her guardian—why the thought of Warne should have suddenly obtruded itself unbidden, like a vague omen of evil into her soul, it was impossible to say.

When she came down the wide oak staircase into the hall, where she had been received on her arrival, she saw, standing at the bottom of it, lolling irreverently back against one of the stately knights in armor, a person to whom she had not been introduced on the previous evening. She had shaken hands with the master of the house, a silent, gray-haired man who had presided at the dinner table without joining much in its conversation, and, as in a dream, she had answered the numerous questions of Lady Camilla Greyson and her cousin, Mrs. Torrington, whose face somehow reminded of something or some one to whom she could not put a name. But this boy who stood at the bottom of the staircase had certainly not been at the dinner table. Helen had been so tired with her long journey that she had thankfully retired to her room as soon as the meal had ended, and, indeed, all through it she was so worn out and sleepy that she had scarcely taken in all the details of her new surroundings. Still, she was quite sure she had not seen this particular inmate of the house before.

He was a tall, loosely built lad of sixteen. He had curly hair, a wide mouth, a funny little snub nose, and a ruddy countenance freely sprinkled over with freckles, out of which twinkled two small and somewhat comically screwed-up greenish gray eyes. He was dressed in a rough tweed suit, and wore breeches and gaiters. At his feet crouched a long-haired, liver-colored spaniel, looking up with inquiring and inter-

ested eyes at his master, who was curiously engaged in tying a pocket handkerchief tightly around the small middle of a diminutive black-and-tan toy terrier. This animal—certainly the smallest of its breed that it was possible to imagine—was whining piteously and struggling vehemently, as though in dread of impending torture. Helen stopped short, half-way down the staircase, in order to watch what was going to happen. When the youth had firmly knotted the handkerchief round the struggling little creature, he reached up to the iron-mailed warrior above him and proceeded to tie the two ends of it round the outstretched arm of the figure in armor in such fashion that the unlucky toy terrier, howling and yelping with terror, dangled in mid-air over his head. Then the boy laughed aloud.

“There, you little brute! That will teach you to gnaw up my fishing lines! Wait till your fond missus comes down, my little dear, and see what she will say when she sees you swung up on high!”

“How horrid!” cried somebody behind him. He turned, and saw Helen, with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes, swooping down like an avenging angel upon his handiwork.

“Hallo—shut up that! I say—what are you going to do?”

“I am going to untie this poor little beast,” cried Helen, indignantly, her fingers trembling so much that she had some difficulty in finding the knot of the handkerchief to which she had to stretch up at arms’ length above her head. “I don’t know who you are,” she went on breathlessly, “but of all the horrid, cruel, hateful boys I ever met, I think you are the worst.”

“I am Ted Greyson,” said the young gentleman, but he made no effort to stop her autocratic proceedings,

and only stood watching her in a somewhat awestruck silence.

"Well, then, Ted Greyson, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" said Helen, furiously.

"Well, you are a pretty good-cheeked one, Miss Dacre, to tell me that the first time you've ever seen me. Besides, it just shows what a lot you girls know, to call me cruel. It doesn't hurt the little brute one bit—it only frightens him."

Helen had set the unlucky toy terrier free by this time, and was soothing its whimperings by sundry coaxings and caressings. "What do you frighten it for then?" she asked him, still hot with her righteous wrath. "What harm has it done you—poor little beast?"

"Only gnawed up my new fishing tackle! But it's not that so much made me do it as to spite Dora Torrington. It's her dog, and she is such a beast! I—I—didn't mean to be cruel," added the boy, a little falteringly. Helen looked at him. It was not a bad face by any means, although it was an ugly one. There was, in fact, something honest and straightforward about it, and now that he looked rueful and regretful she felt her dislike and horror of his deed of cruelty fast melting away.

"It is always cruel to torment dumb animals," she began, a little formally, with a faint echo of some of old Miss Fairbrother's reproofs in her voice—and then she looked again into the queer pinched-up face and smiled. "But if you are sorry you did it——"

"No, by Jove! I'm not sorry one bit!" cried this curious boy, with a sudden and surprising change of countenance—"I would do it again this minute just to see you look in a rage again as you did when I first saw

you! By Jove, you did look a stunner—you don't look half so pretty now," he added, with uncompromising veracity.

Helen laughed outright. "If that is all, I dare say you will have the opportunity of making me in a rage, as you call it, lots of times more—certainly if you torment animals."

"I never do. I never will again. I only wanted to be revenged on Dora because she set the beast on to my fishing tackle—shut him up in my room all night on purpose, I believe—she hates me so! But there, I'll let her dog alone—I really will—if you will only be friends and make it up. Won't you shake hands?"

It is said that the best friendships are those that have been inaugurated by a quarrel.

Ted held out his hand timidly. It was a boy's hand, red and rough, and disfigured by many a cut and scar. One of the fingers was bent, having been broken at football, and of another the nail was black and discolored. Helen could not help smiling as she resigned her own slim, taper-fingered hand into the firm and hearty grip that closed upon it.

"Yes," she said, kindly, "I will be friends, certainly."

And thus was the bargain between them struck and sealed; never on either side to be repented of. Even on that first morning she was not sorry for her new ally.

Breakfast at Old Park was a desultory meal; the people straggled down to it one by one, and secluded themselves in a gloomy abstraction in their letters or the newspapers.

In some houses—and country houses chiefly—it appears to be the rule that everybody shall be systemati-

cally in a bad temper, and display the worst of manners during the first meal of the day.

It was Helen Dacre's first experience of this singular phenomenon.

It surprised and depressed her to be greeted with a brief "mornin'," thrown at her with averted eyes by the master of the house ere he buried himself from view behind the morning papers propped up against the sugar-basin in front of him, while Lady Camilla only extended a couple of cold fingers to her, murmuring, "Help yourself, I hope you slept well," and fell upon her letters without seeming to expect any reply. Presently in strolled Mrs. Torrington, complaining of neuralgia, and declaring herself incapable of eating; and lastly Lord Bainton—to whose habitual moroseness in the morning hours she was already accustomed—who settled himself in absolute silence opposite to her. Everybody foraged for their own food. After the fashion of wild animals, they prowled round the table with discontented faces, lifting up dish covers and carrying off odd scraps of toast and butter, which they conveyed away, each to his own corner.

Helen Dacre, who was young and healthy, and blessed with a fine and vigorous appetite, felt that without Ted she would certainly have starved; but Ted, too, was young and hungry, and brought her everything that she wanted, so that this bond of union between them cemented their new-formed alliance.

"Has any one seen my beautiful Tiny?" inquired Dora Torrington presently, in the midst of a profound silence. Then she glanced at Teddie, who grinned broadly but answered nothing. Helen told her that her dog was in its basket before the hall fire, a piece of information which she received with a subdued sigh.

Helen could not help watching her furtively. She felt certain that she had seen her somewhere before—the pretty “mignonette” face with its pink-and-white coloring, the tiny red mouth, the soft fluffy hair that stood out like a crown from her small head—all brought back something, some unfinished impression out of the past. But where, and how, and when had she seen it, or its similitude, before? For the life of her she could not remember.

“I wish Helen to receive her first riding-lesson to-day,” remarked Lord Bainton, speaking as one does whose word is law. “I understand that her new horse arrived yesterday, and I wish her to begin as soon as possible. Is there any one here who can teach her, Camilla?”

“I am sure I don’t know. I dare say one of the men could go out with her. You must ask Tom.”

“Tom,” when his attention was called to the subject, looked exceedingly cross, but murmured, as though under pressure of circumstances he was powerless to resist, that the men were all very busy with the hunters just now, but that he would go round to the stables after breakfast and see what could be done.

“You needn’t trouble, father,” here spoke up the son of the house; “*I* am going to teach Miss Dacre to ride.”

Mrs. Torrington looked up with a laugh.

“Good gracious! Since when?” she ejaculated across the table at him.

“Since when? What?” retorted Ted, glaring at her fiercely with a very red face.

“Since when have you turned lady’s man? I thought you hated women, Ted?”

“So I do—*some* women,” replied the boy, markedly.

Lady Camilla looked up quickly.

"Thank you, Ted. If you will go out for a little while with our guest to-day, as your uncle wishes her to begin at once, you will be making yourself very useful. Soon"—with a swift glance at Dora—"I shall be able to confide her, I hope, to a more efficient instructor."

"I am really sorry to give so much trouble," said poor Helen, blushing. "I can easily wait, if Lord Bainton does not mind."

"Oh, it's no trouble, my dear. Mr. Nugent, who is coming here, will, I am sure, be delighted to teach you. He is a splendid horseman, and on non-hunting days will enjoy taking you out."

"Who is Mr. Nugent, pray?" But nobody answered her question. Then Helen became suddenly conscious of something—some undercurrent of comprehension among them all, which she could not understand, and from which she was shut out.

Mr. Greyson, at the foot of the table, laughed immoderately, and said it was as good as a play.

Lord Bainton frowned, and remarked that Nugent was a lucky beggar to be given such a chance, while Dora Torrington, with a little sneer, said to him in an audible whisper that really dear Camilla was quite over-reaching herself on this occasion. Even Ted looked steadily down into his plate and seemed confused.

Helen looked bewilderedly from one to the other. What was it all about? Why had that name acted like a subtle electricity upon these people among whom her life was cast?

"Teddie," she said afterward in the hall, when breakfast was over, "what did they all mean? Why did Mrs. Torrington——"

"Never you mind what Dora says. She is a *cat*! A demon-cat!" answered Teddie, with angry and spiteful emphasis. "Don't listen to her!"

"But *who* is Mr. Nugent?—and why is he to teach me to ride?"

"He is *not* going to teach you to ride. I am!" replied Teddie, with dignity.

"Well, but who is he?" persisted Helen.

"He?—he is a brick!" answered her young partisan, warmly. "You'll like him. He's a brick." And more than that she could not extract from him.

CHAPTER VI.

To her dying day Helen never forgot the condition of abject terror in which she stood ready equipped in a faultlessly fitting habit at the open front door and watched the rapid—far too rapid—approach of the animal which her guardian had ordered to be bought for her in London.

Helen had never been on a horse's back in her life—a fact which, although it had not been a subject of regret to anybody before—now seemed to fill the minds of everybody about her with a dismay amounting almost to consternation. That she should not know how to ride was a calamity which Lord Bainton had never ceased to deplore since he had taken her away from Aberdare House on that memorable September afternoon now nearly four months ago. Their foreign travels, which Helen would have gladly prolonged, were cut short for no other reason than that she might be brought home to be instructed in this great and apparently indispensable accomplishment.

“You must certainly manage to see a little hunting before the season is over,” Lord Bainton had said to her.

“Hunting! don't speak of it!” cried Helen, laughing. “I should tumble off!”

“Pray do not allude to such a thing!” replied the old man, with grave disapproval. “You will have to learn how to stick on. Dear, dear! a fine girl like you not to know how to sit upon a horse! It's inconceivable!”

“I don’t see how or where I could have learnt in my position at Miss Fairbrother’s.”

“Well, we must put all that to rights as soon as possible. Your father was a good horseman. It is probably in your blood—it ought to come to you by nature.”

But Helen did not feel in the least as if nature meant to be of the slightest use to her as she stood—if the truth must be owned—trembling in every limb upon the steps of the front door.

The whole party had assembled to see her mount, and when Ted, on a big bay horse of his father’s, came round the corner of the shrubbery from the stables, followed by a groom leading a very handsome chestnut horse, she felt as if she would dearly love to run back into the house and lock herself up in her bedroom for the remainder of the day.

For the first few moments she enjoyed with gratitude a short reprieve, for everybody gathered about the chestnut, admiring and discussing his points and reputed virtues. Lord Bainton had commissioned a friend who was a good judge of horseflesh to purchase for his ward the best and safest lady’s hunter that money could buy and England could produce. And his friend had faithfully fulfilled his orders.

Sunflower apparently realized everything that the fondest fancy had required of him—he had carried a lady regularly to hounds, was said to possess perfect manners and delightful paces, and was reported to be absolutely free from vice.

As in an evil dream, Helen heard them all talking him over. They felt his legs all round, they pronounced his shoulders to be excellent, and his quarters beyond compare. His height, breadth, and strength

came also under discussion; and all the time her heart was failing and quaking within her.

"You like him yourself, do you not?" said Lord Bainton, turning to her at last. "What do you think of him?"

"He is a very pretty color," was all that poor Helen could find to say between her chattering teeth.

"More than you are, my dear Miss Dacre," cried Mrs. Torrington, laughing. "Why, you are as white as a sheet! What do you think will happen to you? Oh, I only wish I had a lovely hunter of my own! But some people don't value their own luck."

Mr. Greyson—who, where a horse was concerned, was wont to brighten up in his manner—came forward to put her up. She stood as she was told, close to the side of the horse, reached up her hand to the pommel, and held out her foot. Then came a wild struggle, a helpless plunge, a jump that came just a whole minute too late—and poor Helen slipped ignominiously down again on to the ground.

Mr. Greyson uttered an exclamation of impatience; everybody laughed—Mrs. Torrington loudest of all. Helen's white cheeks had turned crimson with shame and mortification; tears gathered thickly in her eyes.

"I shall *never* get upon its back! It is so very—very tall!" she stammered hopelessly. But here Ted came to the rescue.

"Let me put her up, father; I'm stronger than you are," and, shouldering his parent out of the way, the boy came to her side.

"Oh, yes, you will—it's very easy, really," he said, reassuringly. "You can't expect to do things the first time you try. Here, give me your foot and spring when I tell you. Don't," he added, in a whisper,

"*don't* give that beast Dora another chance of laughing at you."

Whether it was that whisper which aroused her pride and put her on her mettle, or whether Ted was really a better hand at the business than his father, or whether she understood what was expected of her better the second time of trying than she did at first, Helen certainly managed to achieve the feat which seemed so impossible with perfect ease, and vaulted lightly into her place in the saddle.

A little sense of victory came to her at once. Ted was delighted. Lord Bainton, who had looked annoyed at her first failure, clapped his hands and cried—

"Bravo, bravo!" while Mrs. Torrington left off laughing at her.

Somehow, directly she was in the saddle, Helen found her courage. After a few simple directions as to her seat and her reins, they started off at a walk down the drive—Ted close by her side, and the groom riding behind them.

"You are perfectly safe, you know," said Ted confidently. "I'll take care of you. You can't possibly come to grief."

Whether this was true or no, Helen at all events believed it. Her trust and faith in her young cavalier were implicit, and she obeyed his instructions humbly and scrupulously.

When they were outside the park Ted told her that she was to hold on tight and follow him, and immediately put his horse into a canter along the wide grass margin of the road. With a little shake of his head the chestnut started forward after him.

"Come on—don't be in a funk," were the only directions Ted gave her—and she obeyed him as to the first

order, and after the first few moments of wild confusion began, somewhat to her own surprise, to obey the second as well.

Perhaps, as Lord Bainton had told her, the art of it was in her blood, and had lain dormant within her all these years, awaiting only the opportunity to awake into life. It is certain that good horsemanship is an inherited thing, and that it runs in some families in a remarkable degree; while in others, do what they will, it seems to be entirely left out.

"Oh, it's l—lovely!" stammered Helen breathlessly, when they pulled up after about half-a-mile's spin along the smooth, green turf. "I had no idea it would be so nice."

"You like it!" cried Ted, triumphantly. "I knew you would. You get on capitally, and sit as square as a rock. You'll do—I'll teach you in no time. Hold your hands a little lower, and catch up your curb a little when you let him go—so. Now give him his head."

And off they started anew.

And so it was Ted, and not the unknown Mr. Nugent, who had the pride and glory of teaching Helen Dacre to ride. The lessons were repeated daily, and she progressed rapidly. To be sure, she was perfectly mounted, and no unlucky accidents occurred to scare away her new-born courage; and Ted was very careful of her, and very proud of her, too, for she certainly was a most intelligent pupil. Her seat and her hands were naturally good, and once confidence came to her there seemed little left to teach her. On the fourth day she was jumping over hurdles in the field, much to her own and her young teacher's delight.

Their friendship made rapid strides during these

daily lessons, and Helen often caught herself wondering sadly what she would do when the holidays came to an end, and Ted went back to school.

One afternoon they went out as usual for their ride. It had been arranged that Helen, specially attended by a groom told off to look after her, should make her first appearance in the hunting-field the next day. The meet was within three miles of Old Park, and all the riding portion of the establishment was to be there. Ted had given up his hunting for nearly a whole week, in order to pursue his course of instruction, and had seen his father and uncle ride off together, nearly daily, without a pang of envy,. But now he gave it as his opinion that Helen could ride to hounds as well as the best of them; and so the morrow was chosen for her *début* in Meadowshire.

At lunch, Ted and Helen had so much to say to each other about the line of country they were going across that afternoon—for they had by this time quite forsaken the roads—that they had no time to listen to the conversation of their elders. Yet, as in a dream—which came back later to her recollection—Helen did hear that the dog-cart was to go to the station to meet the 5.15 train, and that Mr. Gilbert Nugent was certainly expected to arrive by it.

She did not care at all about Mr. Gilbert Nugent now—he did not interest her in the least—he was to bear no part in her equestrian education. Ted had taught her everything she ought to know, and she could learn the rest by herself. She was not only young, but, for her years, was preternaturally ignorant of the world, and of things which young women often pick up almost instinctively. If she had not been, she might have remarked the curious sense of expectation which

awaited this fresh addition to the party. Lady Camilla's suppressed excitement, and Dora Torrington's scarcely concealed agitation, would not have escaped an older or a wiser woman; but Helen saw nothing beyond Ted's ugly, friendly face, and had no thoughts that did not centre themselves upon Sunflower's performances over the hedges and ditches, and her own nerve and dexterity in getting him across them.

So they started full of hope and full of young, animal spirits, and meanwhile, the dog-cart went duly to the station, while the short winter afternoon wore itself away.

The road from the station ran for about a mile and a quarter along the side of the railway. The steady old mare between the shafts of the high dog-cart had gone backward and forward to meet the trains so often during the course of her life, that she was pretty well hardened to the rush and the roar of the locomotive along the line, yet even she made a dart forward, for about fifty yards, as the London express, snorting red fire and steam, thundered up behind her out of the darkness of a particularly dark evening.

"Steady, old lady, steady!" said Nugent, drawing her in with a firm hand, as the express rushed away ahead into the depths of the night, and, with a wild farewell shriek, plunged into the tunnel and was seen no more. Almost immediately afterward, the groom by his side turned sharply round, exclaiming, "There's a runaway horse, sir, coming up behind." And the words were scarcely out of his lips before a horse and rider tore wildly past the dog-cart. The light of the lamps flashed for one moment upon the maddened animal, upon his shining flanks lashed into foam, and upon the flying blackness of a woman's skirt.

"By heavens! it's a lady!" cried Nugent, striking the mare with his whip; and the dog-cart dashed forward in pursuit.

"There's a nasty place ahead, sir," suggested the groom. "That there steep bank into the canal."

Gilbert Nugent knew every inch of the road. He did not need to be reminded of it. A faint cry for help came back to him out of the darkness. He stood up and shouted with all his might, "Pull his head round into the hedge with a sharp jerk, if you possibly can."

The lady, with more presence of mind and more vigor of arm than ladies under such circumstances are wont to display, instantly obeyed his directions. He could see by the dark outline of horse and rider before him, against the lighter color of the road, that she gave two or three successive tugs to the horse's head, and with such good results, that the animal suddenly swerved round. There was a soft grassy ditch and a very high straggling hedge, and into the ditch and the hedge the horse and his ride went with a crash, and fell together in a confused heap among the long grass.

Nugent uttered an exclamation between his teeth, but, risky as it was, he remembered the steep, defenceless chalk bank into the canal, a hundred yards ahead, and felt that his advice had been good.

In another minute he was out of the cart, assisting the lady to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" He could not see her face, but he could feel that she was trembling very much.

"No—I think not—only bruised—I—I think my arm is twisted—please see after my horse."

Sunflower had struggled to his feet, and stood quietly by, apparently untroubled by shame or remorse as to his past conduct.

"It's the young lady as is staying at Old Park, sir," said the groom, recognizing the chestnut even before his rider—

"You had better ride the horse home, and I will drive the lady back," said Nugent.

He helped her up into the cart. Her hat was battered, and her habit covered with mud. He could see that she was dreadfully shaken and upset. She looked faint, and he had no flask with him that he could get at.

Even after he had got her up into the cart, a work of some difficulty, she lay back for a few moments, with closed eyes, quite incapable of speech. After they had driven on a little way, she roused herself to say a few words.

"I ought to thank you; please forgive my ingratitude."

"Pray do not attempt to speak. I fear you are feeling very much upset. I wish I could have spared you that tumble—but look to the right," pointing downward with his whip. "I was afraid your horse might bolt down this nasty place."

The road here took a sharp curve, and by the dim light of the lamps Helen saw beneath her the shining white of a steep chalk bank, with the dark sluggish waters of the canal winding round the base of the declivity. She shuddered at the suggestive sight—a runaway horse might, indeed, have easily gone over that undefended and treacherous incline. It would have meant a horrible, and almost a certain death!

"You certainly have saved my life," she said, after a moment of silence—

"We wont say anything about that. You are shivering—you must let me wrap you up."

He wound his own travelling rug round her shoulders, tucking it carefully and almost tenderly about her, and in this fashion they arrived in due time at Old Park.

CHAPTER VII.

GILBERT NUGENT had not troubled himself in the very least as to who was the unknown young woman he had picked up out of the ditch and driven home by his side through the dark and winding lanes. It did not matter to him who it was. The groom had stated that the lady was staying at Old Park, and from the imperfect evidence of his senses he had perceived that she was young, with a slim and girlish figure.

Young ladies—nieces and *protégées* of Lady Camilla—frequently stayed at Old Park, but they had never interested him in any way. As Dora Torrington had said of him, he disliked girls. He thought them mostly insipid and foolish, and her ladyship had so often endeavored to set little traps for him with regard to them, in order to detach him from Dora, that he had come to regard all her young lady visitors with a certain amount of suspicion. Who this young lady might be he neither knew nor cared. If he had known, he would have felt perhaps sorry that he had averted her from a watery grave, or that he had not left her in a fainting condition in the wet ditch into which she had fallen headlong. The name of Dacre was naturally not one that he was disposed to love; although, with a certain philosophy that was in his character, he often told himself that if the girl had defrauded him of a fortune she had, at any rate, done him one good turn to make up for it, for she had rendered it impossible for him to marry Mrs. Torrington. As they neared the house he

suddenly became ludicrously awake to the fact that his divinity would have an access of very bad temper, were she to witness his arrival with this young lady by his side. There would have to be explanations of all kinds, and Dora would laugh her little bitter mocking laugh, and look as if she did not believe a word of the story. He knew her of old!

"I think," he said to his companion, "that if you don't mind I will drive straight into the stable-yard."

"Oh, yes, certainly; that will be much best," answered the hitherto silent figure by his side; "then I can run into the house by the back door."

Helen, too, had felt the embarrassment of her return to the house in a muddy and battered condition, and under the escort—not of her friend Ted, whom she had lost in the darkness when her horse bolted at the train—but of a strange gentleman to whom she had not been formally introduced, although, of course, she had long ago concluded him to be the expected Mr. Nugent, about whom there appeared to hang such an atmosphere of mystery.

When he helped her down out of the dog-cart, he saw her face plainly for the first time, and a very fine pair of gray eyes looked seriously and gravely up into his.

"I should be very much obliged to you if you would kindly not say anything about my little accident," she said to him. "The fact is, I want to go out hunting to-morrow."

"I quite understand," he answered, with a smile. "Lady Camilla might not allow you to go! I will be sure to be discreet."

She had unwound his rug from her shoulders, and, giving it him back with a little bow, she slipped quickly across the yard toward the back premises of the house.

"I call that a sensible girl," thought Nugent to himself, as he strolled round to the front door. "Doesn't make a fuss about things, and she is plucky, too—wants to hunt to-morrow!" And then he went in and forgot all about her.

It so happened that Helen's secret was kept. She ran up against Ted on the back stairs—he had encountered the groom who had ridden Sunflower home, had heard all that happened to her from him, and was overjoyed to find her unhurt and still bent upon her day's hunting on the morrow.

"But I tell you what—we musn't let my uncle hear a word about Sunflower's having bolted, or he wont allow you to ride him to hounds."

"That is exactly what I thought, Ted, and it was only the train frightened him. Don't let us tell any one."

"How about Nugent?"

"I've asked him to say nothing."

"I say," looking at her oddly, as he leant back against the wall of the narrow passage, "Did you make friends with him, Nell?"

"With Mr. Nugent? Oh, I hardly said a word to him, and I was so frightened at first, and I felt so faint. I couldn't have talked."

"Did you tell him your name?"

"No. Why on earth should I? Let me go by, dear boy. I am so muddy, and so tired; I must go to my room and rest, or I shall not be fit to come down to dinner."

"Well, you are a jolly good sort to be still keen on hunting to-morrow," said Ted approvingly, as he allowed her to pass him. "I must say that, *for a girl*, you aren't half a bad chap."

Mrs. Torrington looked very charming that evening, as she stood ready dressed for dinner before the fireplace in the old oak-panelled hall. She had arrayed herself in a particularly becoming and somewhat juvenile costume of soft white *crêpe de chine*, and so admirably did the delicate fabric harmonize with the clear tints of her still wonderful complexion, with the childlike blue eyes, and the fair aureole of softly coiled hair about her small head, that nobody seeing her thus for the first time would have guessed her to be within ten years of her real age. There are some women who at thirty are already faded and old, who have sunk back into the pale ranks of those whose power is over—whose charm forever is buried in the past. There are others who seem to possess the wonderful gift of keeping the hand of Time at bay for an indefinite term of years—whose voices still preserve the ring of youth, and whose faces retain the faculty of attraction and of conquest long after the reality of their first beauty has passed away. Such women have always maintained their ascendancy over men's lives.

Dora Torrington had thus learnt how to defy the passing years. She had suffered a good deal from them, but she had not allowed them to rob her of her perennial youthfulness. "When I grow old and wrinkled I hope I shall die," she often said of herself; and to keep off those terrible and inevitable wrinkles was the chief study of her existence.

To-night she had striven—heaven knows with what elaborate care—to make herself supremely fair, and certainly her efforts had been successful.

Even Gilbert Nugent, when he joined her in the hall, was conscious of the loveliness which, had he known it, was put forth all for himself.

"How remarkably well you are looking, Dora!" he said to her, as he came and stood beside her in the fire glow. "Old Park suits you."

"Do you think so?" she replied, smiling sweetly at him. "Are you glad to see me, Gilbert?"

"Of course! We have not met for some time. What have you been doing with yourself this winter? Country house visits, I suppose? Any new flirtations?"

"How unkind you are! Do I ever forget *you*, Gilbert?"

He made no response—only looked down, and the ghost of a sigh escaped his lips. How he wished, indeed, that she would forget him. His silence and his coldness exasperated her. She knew that he was tired of her—dead sick of her!—and that if she would but give him his liberty, he would be thankful to her; and yet she was aware that his honor, and a certain steadfastness of affection, prevented him from transferring his allegiance elsewhere; and she would not loosen the chain, or set free the wearied captive.

"What can he want better?" she said to herself. "It's not as if I were old or ugly. I am still as attractive as ever to other men, and in all these years I have not aged a bit. He has no excuse. If he were half a man he would marry me—poor as we both are. But he is too selfish to marry into poverty; he is incapable of such generosity. Very well! and so am I! I will not set him free till the ten years of our bargain are over!"

Then, because she was as clever as she was pretty, she played her trump card.

Nestling up close to him, and twisting her soft, bare arm through his, she whispered, with laughing eyes—

"Camilla has got another wife in readiness for you. She has laid a delightful little trap for you this time."

Nothing irritated Nugent more than this match-making propensity of his hostess. Old friends as the Greysons were, he often told himself that he would come to their house no more if this system of persecution was to continue. He laughed a little angrily. "I should have thought she was tired of that game!"

"Not a bit. She has invited you on purpose. She is quite sure you will succumb this time."

"She asked me to come because you were here—in order to meet you. Naturally I accepted the invitation with alacrity and promptitude!" There was a little mocking sarcasm in his reply which Dora did not forget to make a note of.

"Oh, that was a blind! The girl she destines you for is already in the house. No doubt she is well primed. Why, she even confided the scheme to *me*! She thinks I ought to persuade you, for your own good, to marry her."

"For my own good! Why should marriage be for any one's advantage? Every marriage I ever heard of is more or less unhappy! Why can't you women let a man alone, instead of always shoving matrimony down his throat, as if it were a panacea for all human ills? I am not going to marry any one to order—not any one!" He said it with a sort of fierce anger. He might—or he might not—have meant to imply more than he said. Mrs. Torrington laughed a little mirthless laugh he had often heard before.

"Of course not; why should you? Besides, for three years longer you are bound to remain a bachelor; so isn't it a good thing that you never do feel inclined to rush into the bonds of matrimony?"

He looked savage, but made no answer. She had a way of turning the tables upon him which irritated him.

"This girl—" began Dora again, after a short pause.

"Oh, you needn't tell me about her!" he said, turning away impatiently. Of course it was the girl on the runaway horse whom he had driven home in the dog-cart. Seen in the light of his own prejudices, the whole of this episode now appeared to him to be a pre-concerted plan: it had all probably been got up on purpose—a sensational introduction to arouse his interest or his compassion. The flagrant injustice of this improbable hypothesis did not even strike him. "I take no interest whatever in these girls and their plots!" he said angrily.

"Camilla thinks you will in this one."

"Why this particular one?"

"Because she has money."

"Money! What a nice opinion Lady Camilla must have of me! I'm a vulgar fortune-hunter now, I suppose?"

"This girl's fortune has something peculiar about it."

"How do you mean?"

"Only that it ought to be yours," she said lightly, turning away.

"Mine! Good heavens—who on earth—? Ah! I begin to see! Come here, Dora—come back—tell me at once—is it that wretched girl?"

He followed her half across the hall; under the light of a tall standard lamp he caught her by the hand and drew her close to him. He looked flushed, eager, excited. Dora's face turned up toward him was beaming with a smile—the smile of triumph and of victory. The lamp-light fell upon them both.

Some one in the shadow of the landing above stood still for one moment at the top of the stairs to look at them. In her black evening dress no ray of light

illumined her motionless figure. She could not hear their voices, but their faces were clear to her—the hands that were clasped together, the eyes that were occupied with each other—the handsome man bending over a delicately pretty woman. It all came back to her at once with a flash of recollection.

“I know now where I have seen her and him,” said Helen to herself, “They are the same two who were on the coach that came across the common. I envied them then—they looked so happy, so oblivious of everything but each other. I envy them now—they look at one another now—they are happy, no doubt, to be together; they are lovers!”

It seemed to come home to her like a revelation, and she stole softly downward, with noiseless footfalls upon the velvet pile carpet.

What a handsome couple they made; how happy they must be! Oh! how good it must be to love and be loved by such a man as that!

Then suddenly she heard his voice—a voice that trembled with emotion, and yet the emotion was scarcely that of love.

“Do you mean to tell me that wretched girl has been brought here to mock me—to triumph over me?”

“Not at all. To marry you,” was the laughing answer. “That is the plan. To marry you to her, so that you may get your uncle’s money back through her.”

“My God! it is an insult! Why, if there were not another woman in the whole world I would not marry Helen Dacre.”

A swift upward rush, the retreating rustle of a silken skirt, and the staircase was empty once more. The listener was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE hounds met the next morning at Welton Gorse—a small common, with a public-house at one corner of it, situated about three miles from Old Park.

By eleven o'clock a good muster of horsemen had assembled at the appointed place, in the open space in front of the Green Man, while from the stable-yard behind it glimpses could be obtained of the pack of hounds, carefully suppressed into silence and expectation by the two whips.

Not many ladies were present, for the day was damp and misty; and, with a falling glass, only the very few who regarded hunting as a business, and not as a trifling pastime, had ventured to put in an appearance. It was, therefore, not very difficult for Gilbert Nugent to recognize the heroine of his last night's adventure, even if her proximity to Ted had not revealed her identity to him.

He had not seen Miss Dacre at dinner last night. For some reason or other, which was not communicated to him, she remained in her own room. He was left to imagine that her tumble had tried her more than he had at first supposed, and his angry attitude toward her had undergone a certain amount of modification in consequence.

"Poor girl!" he thought, with an almost involuntary spasm of compassion, as he saw the butler push away her vacant chair from the dinner table; "perhaps after all she was hurt."

Her absence served also to arouse a little curiosity in his mind about her. He gathered from a word or two he overheard between Lady Camilla and her brother, that she had excused herself from appearing on the grounds of a headache, caused by over-fatigue from her ride.

"I don't think her very strong," he heard Lord Bainton say. "I believe I ought not to allow her to hunt to-morrow."

"Oh, let her go to the meet anyhow, uncle," put in Teddie eagerly. "Besides, she'll be all right to-morrow."

"Nothing unusual happened, I suppose, this afternoon?" inquired Lord Bainton of his young nephew. "The horse went all right?"

"Oh, yes, all right," replied Ted, with unblushing mendacity. And Mr. Nugent, who might have supplied the required information, discreetly held his tongue.

The next morning—dressing on a hunting day being a lengthy and arduous undertaking, not to be lightly hurried over—Nugent came down, unfortunately late for breakfast, to find that Ted and his pupil had already started. Dora, too, had finished her breakfast, and was impatient to be off; and Mr. Greyson, who mounted her occasionally on one of his worst horses, was already in the saddle and offering her his escort.

"I'll wait for Gilbert, thanks," she answered; "he has just finished his breakfast." Upon which her cousin and Lord Bainton rode off together.

"What is the meaning of that business, Tom?" inquired Bainton of his brother-in-law; "is the pretty widow engaged to Nugent?"

"I suppose so, though they declare there's nothing

in it; but I'm not up to the ways of young men and young women of the present day."

"I don't see how they are to marry if they have no money."

"Neither do I. That is why Camilla hoped he might take a fancy to your ward, Bainton."

"Oh, as to that," replied the other, with some offence, "I do not consider that he would be by a long way a good enough match for her, and my consent until she is twenty-one is necessary."

"And you would not give it in this case?" inquired Mr. Greyson, with a little anxiety; for he, too, had been infected with his wife's fears lest Bainton should spoil Ted's chances by marrying his ward.

"I should be guided by circumstances," replied Lord Bainton, a little stiffly, after a moment's pause. "Helen's own wishes and her happiness will be naturally my first consideration."

"Well," remarked Mr. Greyson meditatively, "a woman might do worse than trust her happiness to Gilbert Nugent—he is a good fellow."

"If by a 'good fellow' you mean a good sportsman, an undeniable shot, a first-rate billiard-player, and a pleasant companion, I quite agree with you; but regarded as a suitor for my ward, there are two very serious objections to him. His not unnatural desire to regain Ashworth's money, which would probably influence his motives to a considerable extent; and his undesirable and, to my old-fashioned ideas, incomprehensible friendship with your cousin, Mrs. Torrington."

"There is no harm in Dora Torrington," said his brother-in-law, with a quick flush. "The whole thing is silly, I grant you—but it means nothing."

"Possibly not, but the world has said—and who is to

say that the world is not right?—that, considering the publicity which has been given to the friendship, if Nugent marries it is your cousin who ought to be his wife.”

Mr. Greyson rode on in silence by his side. “So much for Camilla’s match-makings!” he thought ruefully. “It is clear that, unless the girl herself falls in love with him, nothing can be done.”

Helen, sitting very straight upon her handsome chestnut horse, opposite the “Green Man,” was very far from falling in love with anybody. It was Lord Bainton himself who formally performed the introduction.

“I want to introduce you to Miss Dacre,” he said to Nugent when the latter at length rode up to the scene of action.

“Delighted, I’m sure,” replied the young man, with, however, very little delight in his voice and face. Helen was on the further side of the little cluster of horsemen. As Nugent approached her in the wake of her guardian, he had the opportunity of observing her carefully before she was aware of his presence. Instantly a picture rushed back to his memory—a picture of a wide common, brilliant with yellow gorse and gold-brown bracken, and flooded with the rays of the dying sun; and in the foreground, the tall, solitary figure of a woman standing alone by the roadside. Seen again, with another common—a flat, gray, dismal-hued plain, this one—behind her, he knew her again at once. That picture, transient and insignificant as it had seemed, had left a curiously vivid impression upon his mind. There had been a sort of premonition within him ever since that day that he was destined to see that woman again—that she was to bear some part, either for good or evil, in his future life; and now he found

himself once more face to face with that fleeting vision of the past. And, oh, marvel of marvels! the woman was Helen Dacre!

A warm flush swept over her pale oval face as she returned his bow.

"This is your first day's hunting, I believe?" he inquired politely.

She assented almost mutely, without meeting his eyes. A wild rage was in her heart toward this man, whose terrible words about herself she had overheard last night; and a desperate resolve had arisen in her mind.

Lord Bainton had ridden farther away. Nugent seized the opportunity to say to her in a low voice—

"I trust you are none the worse for your fright and your tumble yesterday? I felt quite anxious about you when you did not come down last night. Are you better?"

She turned her eyes fully upon him. What fine eyes they were—large and deep and gray. He was sure they could be very tender eyes. But there was no tenderness in them now. On the contrary, they were filled with such a hard and angry resentment as they met his, as to cause him a most curiously unpleasant surprise.

"Mr. Nugent," she said to him in a low, steady voice, making no pretence at an answer to his polite questions concerning her health, "I think we had better understand one another at once."

"Miss Dacre!" he stammered.

"Yes. Dacre is my name. I am without doubt that 'wretched girl' who has robbed you of your uncle's money. This being the case, it will be better that we should remain total strangers to each other—as far,

that is, as the exigencies of our position will permit of it."

"Upon my soul, Miss Dacre, you are horribly unjust to me!" cried Nugent, in uncontrollable agitation. For it is one thing to denounce an unknown young lady behind her back, and quite another to proclaim oneself the enemy of a lady whose flashing and beautiful eyes are looking into one's own.

"You are-most unjust!" he repeated hotly. "And I do not understand you in the least."

"On the contrary, it is justice alone that is my aim and object," she replied calmly, "and I will proceed to make my meaning perfectly clear to you. It is within your power to leave Old Park, but as it is not within mine, it will be necessary that we shall exchange the ordinary civilities of daily life as long as we are both the inmates of Mr. Greyson's house. More than this I forbid."

"You forbid?"

"I forbid you to speak to me one single word more than is required of necessity by the presence of other people."

"But why?—why?" he repeated blankly.

"Because I overheard what you said about me last night to Mrs. Torrington."

"Oh!"

He could not utter another sound. He fell back from her side speechless. There was no apology on the face of the earth that could make his peace with her. No single word in all the length and breadth of the English language that could avail him anything. The absolute hopelessness of any such attempt paralyzed him.

His face as he drew away his horse from her side

was ashen gray. Nothing in the whole course of his life had ever struck him such a blow. The utter debasement he experienced—the agony of intolerable shame which turned his whole being sick and cold—was an utterly new thing to him. Was it possible that it was to him—to the handsome and popular Gilbert Nugent, who ever had but to smile, in order to succeed—whose only complaint had been that women, from Dora downward, pursued him too persistently and too flatteringly—that it was to *him* that those cruel and scathing words had been spoken? In a few moments he felt as though he lay under some horrible enchantment. The gay scene about him became vague and indistinct before his eyes; and when some acquaintance spoke to him, he stared blankly in his face and gave back no answer.

The business of the day aroused him at this moment from his stupefaction. The master gave the signal, the mottled pack of hounds came out of the stable-yard of the inn and trotted up the muddy road, escorted by the whips, and the whole field proceeded to file along after them in the direction of the gorse covert which was to be drawn. Nugent followed with the rest. On ahead, between her guardian and Ted Greyson, he could see Helen Dacre's slim back and the smooth brown hair coiled round her little upright head; could watch the easy movements of her graceful figure, and the smooth outline of the oval cheek, as she turned to speak first to one and then to the other of her companions. Somehow he could not help looking at her; the sight of her filled him with a blind exasperation, with a maddening anger; and yet it was impossible to him to turn either his eyes or his thoughts away from her.

All the time the hounds were drawing the covert,

although he had moved as far away from her as possible, and although his own devoted Dora was once more at his side, he was still painfully and acutely conscious of the presence of the girl who had forbidden him to speak to her.

How handsome she had looked; how fine was the fire in her angry eyes and the curl of her scornful lip! How sweet those eyes and lips would look under other circumstances—to a man, for instance, whom she loved!

And then his eyes, glancing aside, fell upon Dora's upturned little face in close proximity to his own. Somehow a process of unwilling comparison went on swiftly and almost involuntarily in his mind. Now, Mrs. Torrington did not look her best upon a horse. The stiff lines of a habit did not suit her babyish style of beauty. Her hair fluttered incongruously beyond her tall black hat, and her tie and collar were not quite everything that the taste of a fastidious sportsman demands. Moreover, the chill damp wind had taken the crispness out of the tiny curled rolls at the nape of the neck, so that they fell limply and untidily over her collar, while that same ungenial breeze had imparted a tinge of redness to the tip of her flower-tilted nose. Dora looked ever so much nearer her real age this morning than she had done last night in all the panoply of her evening-dress glory.

"What are you looking so solemn about, Gilbert?" she asked him, tapping his arm playfully with her hunting-crop. "You haven't spoken a single word to me since we got here. What is the matter?"

"It's beastly cold," he answered crossly, not answering her look and smile. "How many minutes more have we got to stand shivering here! There never are any foxes in this vile country."

"Listen!" she answered, as a faint whimper arose from the covert before them: "they have found already. We shall be off in a moment. Mind you keep near me, Gilbert, and pilot me across my fences."

"My dear girl," he answered roughly, "if ladies choose to come out hunting they must just take their chances like other people. I really cannot promise to give up my day's sport to look after you. You'd far better go back if you are nervous."

Before she could make any reply to this ungracious speech a shout arose.

"Gone away—gone away!" came wildly from a dozen throats from the further side of the covert. Everybody proceeded to rush headlong down the green slope, beyond where a small reddish object was to be seen flying madly away across the open, with the whole pack in full cry after it.

Helen, by a piece of good luck, found herself well to the front of the field.

"Sit tight, and keep his head straight," had been Ted's parting instructions as he shot on ahead of her, while Lord Bainton adjured her to be careful, and to follow him through the gates and gaps, which, at his advanced age, he now most frequently affected. But small heed has twenty for the prudent counsel of sixty; and Helen, with a good horse beneath her, and with all the ardor and keenness of her youth and courage dancing in her veins, was not to be held back from tasting to the uttermost the delight of her first day after the hounds. She shook her head gayly at her guardian and followed Ted boldly and fearlessly.

On swept the rush of horses across the broad, green meadows. Helen, who was well to the front, would certainly have seen all the fun and been in at the death

at the end of this short and sharp twenty minutes' run but for an incident which altered the whole complexion of the day for her.

Two men—strangers to her—were riding alongside, and one called out to the other—

“A man down at the last fence, isn't there?”

“Yes; his horse staked himself, I think,” was the reply.

“Is the man hurt?”

“I haven't a notion—he didn't get up.”

“Is anybody looking after him?”

“I'm sure I don't know. I wasn't going to lose a good thing for a chap I don't know,” and the two riders shot on in front of her.

There was something to Helen's mind that was very brutal in the utter selfishness of this short conversation. She looked round. Half-a-dozen scattered riders were galloping across the field behind her, and she could just see the head and forequarters of a horse struggling half out of the ditch she had just crossed; but no rider was to be seen.

The hunt and all its untasted joys went straight out of Helen Dacre's head. With a great gush of pity for the unfortunate man whom everybody had forgotten and left behind, she pulled in her excited animal and cantered back to the fence behind.

The horse—badly hurt apparently—lay half submerged in the wet ditch, and on the bank above a man, white and motionless as death itself, lay flat upon his back; his eyes were closed, and a thin stream of blood trickled ominously across his forehead.

She cast one wild look around her—there was not a living being in sight.

That man was Gilbert Nugent.

CHAPTER IX.

To find oneself alone in a sylvan landscape with a man who is to all appearances perfectly dead, and yet whom common humanity compels one to succor, is not an enviable position for the most stout-hearted; but when this unfortunate predicament occurs to a young and inexperienced girl, and the man stretched out helplessly before her happens to be the one person on earth to whom she has sworn an eternal enmity, there is an aggravation of the circumstances of the case which may be said to be absolutely appalling.

Helen Dacre, left alone with the seemingly lifeless corpse of Gilbert Nugent, was, for the first few moments, completely at her wits' end. She had sprung hastily from her horse, and, tying him up to a neighboring tree, did her utmost for some minutes to restore animation to the injured man. Kneeling down by his side in the wet and muddy banks, she lifted his head upon her arm, and having discovered his flask in the side-pocket of his coat, she tried to force the neck of it between his lips. This, however, was a hopeless endeavor, for his teeth were firmly clenched together. Then she bethought her of the muddy ditch below; and, taking off her hat, she filled it with the water, and proceeded to bathe his forehead with her handkerchief. By this she only revealed the ugly cut across his temples, from which the blood continued to flow slowly forth; but she did not succeed in restoring the faintest sign of life.

By this time she had become thoroughly and dreadfully frightened. Standing up, she looked about her in every direction for any indication of human habitation, but neither north, south, east, nor west was there the vestige of a living being, or the humblest of cottages to be descried. Only far away, at the top of a wooded hill, she thought she could discern a thin blue line of smoke stealing sluggishly upward to the gray and lowering sky. Then she shouted at the top of her voice for help, but no sound came back to her out of the silence save the faint, mocking echo of her own cries. At this moment, to make matters still worse, it began to rain.

"Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?" cried the bewildered girl aloud, in her despair.

She looked down upon the poor white face that lay upon the trampled and muddy grass at her feet, and saw how the pitiless rain was falling straightly and mercilessly upon it, and all her heart went out in compassion and pity toward him who lay there so still and so helpless. Once more she fell on her knees beside him, and a divine, womanly sorrow arose within her, overcoming all her hatred and anger to him, so that the tears streamed freely over her downcast face.

"Oh, poor fellow—poor fellow!" she murmured aloud in broken accents, "is it possible that he can be dead? and only an hour ago he looked so handsome, and brave, and bright, as he sat on his horse among the rest! Oh, what am I to do to help him?" But the drenching raindrops only fell down faster and faster upon the white and inanimate face—and nobody answered her cries. Then she realized that she must go for help. She must leave him—and yet how leave him like this?

Out of his pocket, when she had found the flask, there

had fallen a small penknife. Without a moment's hesitation she picked it up and cut a large square of cloth out of the skirt of her habit. It did not even cross her mind that it was a new one worn to-day for the very first time. Then, cutting a couple of stakes from the hedge behind her, she so arranged the piece of cloth over the head of the insensible man that it formed a complete shelter to his face. This done, she started off at a rapid pace across the fields toward the distant line of smoke, which seemed to denote the nearest house to which she could go for help.

Helen Dacre never forgot that walk. It was in reality little more than a mile before she reached the substantial farm-house that was her goal; but if it had been five it could not have been a more painful or terrible experience to her. It was raining hard, the ground was heavy, and the thick clay soil stuck to her boots and delayed her steps. There was no path; she had to make her way over the hedges and ditches, creeping through gaps and scrambling over railings as best she could. Very soon the ground rose steeply from the flat fields below, and the ascent of the hillside added to her labor and her fatigue; and as she struggled painfully onward—breathless and trembling—great sobs of compassion and of terror for him she had left behind rent her bosom now and again with despair and woe. When at length she reached the red-brick farm that crowned the hilltop she stumbled and fell, half fainting across the open threshold, at the feet of the astonished farmer, who, by good luck, happened to be coming out of his house.

Perhaps, but for Helen Dacre and for the timely succor which through her efforts was speedily brought to him, Gilbert Nugent—left in his dangerous condition,

exposed to the rain and the wind—might indeed have died that day. Afterward, when he was getting better, and the story of her courage and fortitude was told to him as he lay upon his bed, it seemed to him that in very truth he owed to her his life, and that but for her he must have perished. But a great many long days and nights had passed away before the knowledge of what she had done for him came home to his clouded intelligence.

For he was very ill. A severe concussion of the brain bereft him for days of all knowledge and all thought, and he lay for some time hovering between life and death, with the odds very much in favor of the latter contingency.

During that time Old Park assumed the similitude of a hospital. Voices were hushed and footsteps trod softly about the house. Sick nurses, one for day and one for night, were installed upstairs; and doctors came and went, and consulted, and shook their heads and looked grave, for many days. Then with the return of consciousness came high fever, and a new danger to the patient. The height of his temperature, the condition of his strength, were the chief topics of conversation and of interest, and there was not a thought or a feeling from morning till night among them all that did not centre in that darkened sick room upstairs.

During these weeks—three of them—that dragged their weary length away one after the other, sundry minor changes took place among the inmates of Mr. Greyson's old house.

Lord Bainton, sick to death of the gloom, and secretly bored at having to talk below his breath and creep along the passages on tiptoe, made a few polite excuses to his sister and her husband and took himself

off to a cheerful country house in the adjoining county, to which he had received a tempting invitation. He left his ward behind, promising to return to see her "by-and-by," a term of beautiful and convenient vagueness which he did not attempt to particularize. Three days after, Teddie, in a most crestfallen state of mind, returned to Eton, and Helen cried her eyes out over his departure, giving him a handsome horseshoe pin set with pearls as a parting present.

There were now only Mrs. Torrington and Helen left in the house with their hosts, and with all the doctors and nurses to talk and to think about.

The behavior of the two women presented a curious contrast. Dora, who was genuinely unhappy, and not at all ashamed of being so, wept a great deal and bemoaned her poor dear Gilbert's condition all day long in unmeasured terms.

Helen Dacre would sit silently by her, listening to her complaints with a little cold and silent scorn in her still and passionless face. Dora no doubt loved him, and had a right to weep for him. Yet Helen thought that in her place she would not have made quite so public a profession of her grief and her affection. Sometimes, too, her wails and lamentations took a curious and almost ludicrous turn.

One evening, after the doctor had left the house with no improvement to speak of in his report, Dora flung herself, face downward, upon the sofa in a perfect paroxysm of grief, and Helen attempted in common humanity to give her what consolation she could think of.

"You know," she said, "that we must not expect any improvement till the fourteenth day, and that will not be till the day after to-morrow."

"And how do you suppose I am to go on enduring this suspense till the day after to-morrow? It is all very well for you. Of course you don't care; he is a stranger to you; but he is the best friend I have in the world, and of course I should go into mourning for him—it would be expected of me by everybody—and there are three new dresses I had ordered, waiting half finished at Madame Dentelle's, and I can't have them touched till I know the worst!"

"Oh!" cried Helen, with a touch of indignation. "I can't imagine how you can think about your clothes at such a time."

"And what else is there to think about, I should like to know? It isn't as if I was allowed to nurse the poor dear and be with him. Camilla is so horribly proper—she won't let me put my nose inside the door; though he wouldn't know me, and he is probably dying. One can't do anything. People would be shocked if I drove to the meet, only because one is a woman. Men have far slacker codes for themselves. There is Tom hunting regularly, as if nothing was wrong; but if I were to be seen on a horse everybody would be scandalized and call me unfeeling."

"I can't think how you can wish to go. I couldn't bear to go out and amuse myself, although, as you say, Mr. Nugent is absolutely nothing to me."

Dora had risen from the sofa, and was drying her eyes before the glass.

"Well, nobody can accuse me of want of feeling, I am sure, considering the oceans of tears I've cried. I declare my eyes are swollen half out of my head. I am hideous! I look a perfect fright, don't I?"—turning round to Helen with an eager hope that she might deny

the question. But Helen only looked at her critically, and replied, cruelly, after a moment's reflection—

“I cannot say that you look your best,” an answer which naturally did not cause Mrs. Torrington to love her any better.

What Helen herself felt about the sick man it would be difficult to say. No doubt she shared the general anxiety on his account, and longed and hoped with the rest that he might recover. Often she was conscious of a curiously persistent heartache which almost overstepped the limits of ordinary Christian sympathy, but she repeatedly assured herself that this was fully accounted for by the part she had been obliged to play in the story of his accident.

“If he had been a common laborer whom I had never seen before,” she said to herself, “I should have done as much for him, and I would feel exactly the same as I do now.”

On the day, however, when at length Gilbert Nugent was definitely pronounced to be out of danger, Helen experienced not only a sense of natural relief, but also an entire revulsion of feeling about him. All her anger and animosity to him seemed to return to her, and the more tender feelings which his dangerous condition had awakened in her died away again entirely.

“I wish I could go away before he is well enough to come out of his bedroom,” she thought. “I never want to see him again.”

But Lord Bainton had left her at Old Park under Lady Camilla's charge, and there seemed no chance at present of his returning to take her away.

Meanwhile Dora was writing out telegrams to her dressmaker and milliner to finish off her colored

dresses, and to send her down some red felt hats to choose from.

"So lucky, isn't it?" she cried delightedly. "Now I can look forward to my lovely pink and gold evening dress again. I really haven't dared to let my thoughts dwell upon it lately. I must positively get it in time for the hunt ball; for of course I can go to that now. Dear me! I thought last week I shouldn't be able to go to another ball for a year."

Helen could not find it in her heart to express any sympathy with these rejoicings.

"How selfish she is," she thought "Is it possible that she can really love him? I have never loved anybody. At least, I am sure that what I feel for poor Frederick is not love at all; so I dare say I shall never know what it is like. But if I were Mrs. Torrington, and Gilbert Nugent loved me, I fancy—I fancy——"

But what Helen fancied about it was never put into words at all, not even in her innermost thoughts.

CHAPTER X.

"MISS DACRE, will you not wait one moment?"

Helen was making for the door. Gilbert Nugent had half risen from his chair by the library fire. It was only the second day he had come downstairs. He was very weak and pale, and his thin hands and the great hollows round his eyes told of the fever-wasted days that he had so lately gone through. The butler and the sick nurse, supporting him one on either side, had led him downstairs, and had deposited him in his chair; and then Helen, who had been sitting on the floor in the window, with a volume of fine old prints in her lap, rose hastily, in order to make her escape.

"Do, please, stay one minute; I want to speak to you."

She paused irresolutely, with her hand upon the door. Her eyes fell, and a little nervous flush mounted to her face.

"Pray don't attempt to stand," she said, with cold politeness; "you are not strong enough."

He sank back in his chair. "You will not go?"

"I will stay for a minute."

"I want to thank you——" he began.

"Pray do nothing of the kind. You have nothing to thank me for," she said, hastily.

"I have been told all that you did for me. But for you I might easily have died."

"I should have done as much for anybody—for a tramp or a beggar," she said coldly.

"That may be; but I must thank you, all the same. In all human probability I owe it to you that I am alive at this present moment, Miss Dacre. How am I to thank you? How am I to convince you of my gratitude?"

She lifted her eyes suddenly and met his. Who would have believed that those same eyes had not long since gazed with such tender anxiety into his lifeless face—that they had shed rivers of tears in divinest pity for his fate? There was neither pity nor tenderness in them now—only that same hard, angry glitter which he had seen in them once before, and remembered all too well.

"Spare me both your thanks and your gratitude," she said remorselessly. "I do not want either."

"Do you mean to say," he stammered, flushing painfully, "that you are still as determined—after all I have gone through, all you have done for me—that you cannot yet forgive me? Surely, things now are changed——"

"Nothing is changed," she interrupted, with a little gesture of anger.

"Then you mean—you mean—that you will not be friends with me?"

"I will never be friends with you!" she replied, in a hard voice. His head fell back upon the cushions of his chair. There was a moment of silence, then the soft opening and shutting of the door, and he was alone.

He sat quite still for some minutes, his eyes, with their dark, hollow circles, staring vacantly in front of him, and his pale face a little paler than usual, and his hands nervously clutching the arms of his chair. At length a long sigh broke from his lips

"My God!" he said aloud; "if I could only make that woman love me!"

As to Helen, she went away with her head erect and her whole figure drawn up with a sense of triumphant victory.

"He shall not think that it was from any weakness toward him—any softening of my heart—that I did what I could for him," she said to herself proudly.

Mrs. Torrington ran up against her in the corridor. "Gilbert is down, I hear? Do you know which room he is in?"

"He is in the library. I have just come from there."

"You! You have seen him, then?"

"Certainly I have seen him, since I was in the room when he was brought in," replied Helen carelessly, as she passed her by.

Dora stood for a moment looking after her a little suspiciously. Her pretty face was vaguely troubled with the keenness of a jealous nature. She began to scent the danger she had been so anxious to ward off.

"I wonder how long they have been alone together," she thought, as she proceeded somewhat thoughtfully toward the library door.

She found Gilbert Nugent abstracted and gloomy. He scarcely responded to her smile, and the fingers which she took warmly into both her hands lay coldly and unresponsively in her grasp.

"Are you tired, Gilbert?"

"No, thank you, Dora."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

She sat down beside him. She had brought the *Times* with her to read aloud to him. He assented quietly when she asked him if she should do so, and she

began to read to him; first the items of latest news, and then the leading articles.

The room was very still and quiet. The weather during the last few days had become thoroughly wintry, and through the windows a soft cloud of snow could be seen falling thickly and noiselessly over the world without. The wood fire burned redly in the wide grate; the clock ticked on the mantelpiece; and as she read the sheets of the newspaper crackled and fluttered in Dora's hand.

There was no chance of any disturbance. Mr. Greyson, taking advantage of the inclemency of the weather, which had put hunting out of the question, had gone up to London for the day, and Lady Camilla at this early hour was wont to be engaged in long conferences with that important personage, her cook-housekeeper.

Dora had reckoned upon a long morning with her slave. After she had been reading for about a quarter of an hour she suddenly became aware, with an intuitive and unaccountable instinct, that her companion was not listening to her. She looked up sharply at him. His eyes were fixed on vacancy—on the falling snow out of doors. He was evidently unaware of the cessation of the monotonous tones of her voice. It was clear to her that his thoughts were engrossed with something else.

“Gilbert!” she said, softly.

He started.

“You have not been paying the slightest attention to what I have been reading!”

“I—I really beg your pardon, Dora. I believe I was thinking of something else.”

Mrs. Torrington laid the paper beside her on the table.

"Then it is hardly worth my while to go on reading."

"Please do. I will listen now," he said penitently.

"No. I can see that you are not inclined for the newspaper. Suppose, instead, that you tell me what you were thinking about."

He turned his face slowly toward her. For a moment his eyes looked questioningly into hers.

"Would you really like me to tell you? I wonder if I might?"

"My dear boy," with a little laugh, "as if there was anything you might not tell me! Are we not pals—the best of pals?"

"Yes," he repeated, slowly; "that is true. The best of pals." And then he was silent again for so many minutes that she began to wonder if he was ever going to speak again.

"Well?" she said playfully, at last, laying her hand caressingly upon his.

He started at her touch. Then, with a quick, little in-drawn breath, in which there was a trace of nervousness, he said quickly:

"I will tell you. Dora, since I have been lying upstairs I have had lots of time to think, and I have thought a great deal about many things."

"About *me*, I hope," with a pitiful attempt at playfulness.

"Well, yes; about you—about you, mainly, I believe," he admitted. Yet somehow this assurance did not stop that cold, sick numbness that had begun to creep slowly but surely into her heart.

"That was nice of you," she said—still, poor woman, bent upon shutting her eyes to her own fears.

"You know," he went on, rather quickly, and not meeting her eyes, but plucking nervously with his thin

fingers at the gimp of the arm-chair; "you know how long it is that we have been friends—nearly ten years, I believe."

"*Seven* years exactly, on the fourth of last August," she amended, in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Well, ten or seven—it is pretty much the same. It is half one's youth, anyhow," with a little uneasy laugh. "It is long enough, in any case, to grow wise, to see things in a clearer light; to——"

"To *change*, you mean," she put in, quickly.

"Well, y-e-s, if you like to put it that way—to change—it is your own word, Dora. You see, I was very young. I was very fond of you——" She winced at the "was." Even a dead love can be raked up into pain at a thoughtless word.

"I—I mean we—always hoped, of course, that things might look brighter—that if I got Uncle Ashworth's money, for instance—or that those shares of yours in the Transvaal mines had turned out trumps, instead of smashing up altogether. Of course it would have been very nice if it had been possible; and if we had been able to marry I dare say we should have been very happy. But as it is—as it is——" and his voice suddenly failed and died away into silence.

She got up from her chair and walked away to the window, and stood for some moments looking out of it with her back to the room.

The snow fell softly and thick; the park was a sheet of white already; the distance was blotted out in a vague, indistinct whiteness. She stood looking at the familiar scene decked in the unfamiliar garment of winter—stood while the moments sped quickly away and the clock ticked the time behind her in unison to the beating of her throbbing pulses. And still the

snow-flakes kept on falling, falling, falling, like the hopes and joys of her own spoilt and broken life!

Presently she turned round and faced him.

"Say at once that you are sick of me—say it at once, honestly!" she cried brokenly.

"My dear girl," with a deprecating gesture and smile, "why call things by ugly names? Do you not think yourself that it is time this unsatisfactory state of things came to an end?"

"You have fallen in love with some one else," she said angrily.

"No—I swear I have not—I swear it!"

"Then—I will not let you go. Why should I? I have your written promise."

"Give it to me back, Dora," he pleaded, "and let us put it in the fire. Surely it is time to end the farce—the thing is dead."

"It may be dead to you," she answered passionately, "and the love you once swore to keep for me may indeed seem to you but a farce; but to me—to me it is neither dead nor farcical. I will not let you go for three years more. I have your promise to be true to me. If I lose you now, what future is there for me save to sit by while you transfer to some other woman the faith which you have given to me? Do you think I could do this?—could endure to be set aside, pushed away out of your life, as though I had never belonged to it? It would break my heart."

For the moment she believed that it would. Her anger and her vanity made her think that she loved him too well to lose him. As a fact, her love had long ago been merged and swallowed up in her intense selfishness. No thought of him, of his future, his happiness, came into her mind. Only the appalling prospect of

her own loss—of the dulness and monotony of a life bereft of the sweet flattery of his attendance, and shorn of all the glory of her conquest of him, which had been so long acknowledged by the world. It hurt her horribly that he should have ceased to love her; but it was her vanity that was hurt, not her heart.

She was a woman incapable of self-sacrifice, and incapable, therefore, of the highest order of affection. Love, to her, meant self-indulgence and the gratification of her own personal inclinations—not that tender and holy care for the happiness of another which is almost a religion in the soul of an unselfish woman.

“I will not let you go,” she said at length in a low, concentrated voice. “I have hoped too long, waited for too many years for that chance which at any moment a lucky turn of the wheel of fortune may still bring to us. I have your written words, and I have what is still more impossible for you to break: your honor, which binds you to me for three years more. After that I will let you go free—not before.”

In her blind and senseless anger poor Dora forgot that for a woman to keep a man whose heart has grown cold to her is as impossible a task as to chain the winds or bid the restless waves stand still.

And deep down in her heart a sure and certain instinct said to her—

“It is that girl. Is it her money, after all, that tempts him? Or has he fallen in love with her because she scrambled across half-a-dozen wet fields to send a couple of men and a hurdle to pick him up? Men are such fools. It is possible that this not very heroic performance has conjured up some sort of glamour about her in his mind. Oh, if I could only find out something discreditable about her! Something that would make him take a dislike to her!”

CHAPTER XI.

IT was the old story. He was tired to death of her!

Constancy is not a masculine virtue. In fact only the marriage bond and its irrevocable exactions can be reckoned on to keep a man's faith immaculate. And not always then, indeed, for there are husbands over whom even marriage vows are powerless. Yet to one who is honestly and conscientiously anxious to do his duty, the ties of married life certainly constitute a safeguard such as his own unfettered heart would never supply. Hence, no doubt, the peril of long engagements—of lovers bound by love alone, and not by law, and the wisdom of the old adage that says, "Happy's the wooing that's not long a-doing." Familiarity, jar-rings of temper, selfishness and worldly wisdom, all lead a man's heart infallibly in time to satiety, and where satiety once sets in then farewell indeed to love and its faithfulness. Then, perhaps, there comes across the troubled and possibly remorseful mind of the lover a new element—a fresh face! A face younger and fairer possibly than hers he knows so well—too well, since he can trace upon it the growth of the tiny wrinkles that steal into the once fresh and blooming cheek, and perceive with painful accuracy the advent of a silver hair among the radiant tresses. The new face, as a matter of course, soon ousts the old from his heart; and brighter eyes and rosier lips provoke him to longings such as her too-familiar features have no power to awaken. After that his faithlessness can be

predicted with certainty. It has become a mere matter of time.

Gilbert Nugent, it may be safely averred, did not love Mrs. Torrington any the better for her trying conversation recorded in the last chapter. Neither were the relations between the two in any way improved or ameliorated thereby.

A sort of dull dislike to her began to grow up within him. The tie had become irksome, and she had neither the wit to perceive it nor the generosity to loosen it. She had appealed to his honor, and by his honor he still conceived it to be his duty to abide; but he took no delight in bowing to the claims of this unwelcome duty.

And in proportion as his heart grew colder and harder toward her, so did his dawning interest in Helen Dacre thrive and flourish.

Helen's attitude toward himself provoked and tormented him. He thought about her constantly, listened for her footstep and her voice, and watched her furtively and with interest.

It may be easily imagined that all these signs and tokens did not escape Mrs. Torrington's notice. A sure instinct made her keenly alive to them, and a passion of jealousy raged at her heart toward the other woman, younger and fairer than herself.

She was forced, however, to admit that Helen took no more notice of Nugent than she did of the silent figures in armor at the foot of the oak staircase.

During the next few days the invalid improved rapidly in health and strength, and began to take his place as before in the family circle.

A day came when a rapid thaw that caused the disappearance of the snow as by magic, and a warm and sun-

shiny morning induced the doctor to recommend that his patient should go out for a drive.

Lady Camilla ordered the barouche, and it was arranged that she and Dora should drive the convalescent man to the meet, while Mr. Greyson and Helen were to follow the hounds.

The riders started first, and the barouche came round to the door just five minutes after the disappearance of the two horses along the drive. Dora was standing by herself just inside the open front door, and the footman was by the carriage outside, when she heard a step upon the gravel, and the voice of a stranger inquiring if Miss Dacre was in. The servant replied that she was not.

"But she is staying here, is she not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you tell me when she is likely to be in?"

"I could not say, sir," was the well-trained domestic's discreet reply.

Dora, impelled by curiosity, came forward and looked out. Outside the door stood a man who might have belonged almost to any class of life. He might have been a shabby gentleman, or he might have been a respectably dressed tradesman.

Dora's first impression, indeed, was that he was a dun, and had come to press for the payment of a bill. He had a reddish beard, sloping shoulders, and a narrow chest, and about the worst hat and boots that she had ever beheld.

Judging him by his outer man, she decided without hesitation that he was not a gentleman, and demanded of him somewhat imperiously what he wanted.

The stranger turned round, lifted his detestably bad hat from a high forehead crowned with a thatch of sandy

hair, and replied that he wished particularly to see Miss Dacre.

The voice was that of an educated man, and Mrs. Torrington perceived that her first impression had done him an injustice.

"Miss Dacre has just gone out hunting. Did you not meet her riding down the drive?"

"No. I must have come by the other road," answered the stranger.

"You will be sure to see her if you call again about five o'clock," said Mrs. Torrington politely, wondering who this shabby-genteel young man could possibly be. He shook his head.

"I am afraid I shall be unable to do that—very important affairs—obliged to return to London by the four o'clock train. I only came on business for one night in this neighborhood."

"Can I give any message for you to Miss Dacre?"

"I am much obliged to you. No; there is nothing but what I can write. But perhaps you will kindly give her my card?" He took one out of his pocket and gave it to her. Then he raised his hat and walked away down the road.

Mrs. Torrington looked down at the card. On it was inscribed in large roman characters, "Mr. Frederick Warne," and in the corner, "Classical Professor, South London High School."

She turned it over contemptuously. It was a vulgar little card—not the kind of card which, in the world to which she was accustomed, a gentleman would have had printed to leave upon his acquaintances.

"It is like a tradesman's circular," she muttered. "What can such a dreadful-looking person have to do with Helen Dacre, I wonder?" Then she slipped the

card into her pocket, and determined to be guided by circumstances.

Lady Camilla and Nugent now appeared upon the scene, and the barouche set forth. Helen had a thoroughly enjoyable day's hunting, and rode her handsome horse straightly and well, earning Mr. Greyson's approbation and gaining confidence in herself and her animal by her performances.

When she got home it was late, and she was tired. Naturally she had seen nothing of the party in the carriage, who had, in fact, returned in time for luncheon. Lady Camilla was still sitting by the tea-table in the hall when her husband and Helen came in. Merely removing her hat, the girl sank down wearily upon the nearest chair, as she accepted her hostess's offer of a cup of tea.

"You have had a nice day, my dear?" inquired Lady Camilla kindly, as she handed her the tea.

"Oh, it has been delightful!" cried Helen, with enthusiasm. "I certainly think that hunting is the most perfect amusement in the world!"

"And you went very well, my dear—very well," said the master of the house approvingly, as he stood upon the hearth-rug with his back to the fire, gulping down his tea. "Ted would have been proud of you. You only want a little more experience to do very well indeed. Where's Dora?" turning to his wife.

"She is upstairs, deep in the delights of a huge packing-case which has just arrived from her dressmaker's. Her new ball-dress, I believe."

"Why doesn't she come out, too—instead of pottering about all day after Nugent? She'll never make half the sportswoman that Helen is even now. The fact is

she is eaten up with vanity. Clothes and flirtations!—she thinks of nothing else.”

“Oh, poor Dora!” laughed Lady Camilla, good-naturedly. “You are rather hard upon her, Tom. She rides very nicely, and, of course, you can’t expect her to be so keen about hunting as a young thing like Helen, who is new to it. Besides, everybody isn’t alike. She can’t at her age be expected to change her nature.”

“More’s the pity,” replied her husband gruffly. “Dora might change most things that are natural to her with advantage.”

And then he stalked away to his study, slamming the door energetically behind him as he went out.

There were a few minutes of silence. Lady Camilla, who always had on hand a long piece of gray woolen crochet, which she called her “poor-work,” and which was destined at some remote period to keep the cold out of some old woman’s rheumatic bones—plied her long bone needle industriously; and Helen sipped her tea, gazing reflectively into the fire as she did so.

“Lady Camilla,” she said at last.

“Yes, my love.”

“I wish you would tell me something I want to know very much.”

“Certainly, Helen, if I can. What is it?”

“Is Mrs. Torrington engaged to be married to Mr. Nugent or not?”

Lady Camilla counted six stitches of her gray worsted, cast off four, and knit two together before she made any reply. Then she said, slowly and rather hesitatingly:

“No, I should say not. What makes you think she is?”

“Everything. She takes possession of him. She

calls him by his Christian name. She seems devoted to him."

"My dear child," said Lady Camilla, after another little pause, during which a great many things rushed headlong through her mind—a desire to take advantage of the opportunity presented to her, a desire to say nothing unjust or compromising to her cousin, and, above all, a desire to be exceedingly discreet—to say enough, and yet not to say too much. All these conflicting claims caused her to take her time about answering.

"I am rather perplexed how to answer your question," she began at last. "Certainly there is a great friendship on both sides, dating from many years ago, which accounts for the familiarities you mention—which do not, however, in themselves amount to anything at all. It is possible, indeed, that at one time the friendship might possibly have led to marriage."

"Ah! then they love each other?" Helen said, rather breathlessly, leaning forward in her chair.

"No, I don't think so. That sort of thing is over, and—to be frank with you—well, I will tell you a secret." Lady Camilla lowered her voice to a whisper. "Dear Dora is a little bit led away by foolish vanity in the matter. She shuts her eyes, I fancy, to what everybody else has seen long ago. Poor Gilbert is tired of her!"

"*Poor* Gilbert, indeed!" cried Helen, indignantly. "I think it is horrid of him—horrid!"

"Oh, my dear, how can he help it? All men do tire in time."

"Then all men are contemptible! If he has loved her once he should love her forever! True love is eternal!"

"Ah, my dear child, that is merely the delusion of your youth and ignorance. You will find out that it

is not at all the case as you grow older and wiser," laughed Lady Camilla softly. And then she placed her finger suddenly upon her lip and whispered, "Hush!"

The door behind her had opened quietly and Gilbert Nugent entered.

"You are back from hunting?" he said, looking at Helen, who made no answer.

"Yes; they have had a capital day," replied Lady Camilla briskly; and then suddenly she made some curiously convulsive jerks with her worsted and crochet-needle.

"There!" she exclaimed; "I've done it again! Dropped all my stitches, and got the wool into a tangle! and my eyes are so bad I can never put it right myself. Here, Helen, you are young; you must do it for me," and she dropped the "poor-work" bodily into Helen's lap. "Get it right, please, my dear, before you go up to dress. I must rush and see if my good man wants me before the post goes out."

"And if he doesn't say something interesting to her in the twenty minutes it will take her to do that job," she said to herself, as she hurried away, "Gilbert Nugent isn't the man I take him for. Dora is safe out of the way, and anybody with half an eye can see who he is in love with. Well, I'll give him a chance, anyhow; poor Gilbert! What a splendid thing it would be for him, to be sure! And till that girl is married to somebody else I really shall never be sure of Bainton."

CHAPTER XII.

HELEN and Gilbert Nugent were left alone. For some moments neither of them spoke a word. Helen drew her chair nearer to the table upon which stood the lamp, and occupied herself industriously in endeavoring to unravel Lady Camilla's tangled worsted. Nugent sat opposite to her, devouring her with his eyes.

Her hair was somewhat ruffled out of its habitual order; her face was a little flushed with her gallop through the fresh air; her lithe young figure, in its close-fitting habit, bent low over her task, and her long eyelashes swept in a dark shadow upon her cheek. Nugent had no inclination for some minutes to break the silence. His eyes took in every detail of her face and form and revelled in its fascination. As he watched the long, slender fingers moving dexterously in and out of the coarse gray worsted, he told himself that they were weaving the meshes of his fate. It was something to sit and watch her unreprieved; and yet probably because the heart of man is never satisfied, and his desires forever unappeased, the picture, delightful as it was, presently seemed to him to be incomplete unless those veiled lids might be uplifted so that he might see the eyes beneath them.

To accomplish this object he broke the silence at last.

"Miss Dacre, wont you look at me?"

"I have got something more important to look at," she replied demurely.

"Something more interesting, no doubt?"

"Much more interesting." This with the ghost of a smile; but the eyes that he longed to see never lifted themselves for so much as for a second from the "poor-work." He grew desperate.

All at once he reached forward his hand, and laid it upon both hers, holding them and the "poor-work," needle and all, firmly together.

"But I will make you look at me! I will make you speak to me! You shall not scorn and insult me any longer! I will not endure it!"

Her hands lay passive beneath his grasp, upon her knee. She did not struggle to free them; she made no sign of resentment, although her color deepened; but she did not lift her eyes.

"It is impossible," he went on, with agitation, "that because of that stupid speech you overheard weeks ago, before I had ever seen you—before I knew what you were—that you can go on sending me into an everlasting coventry."

"I have only forbidden you to speak to me."

"But I never promised that I would not."

The smile broadened upon her face.

"No. You would have kept such a promise very badly, I fancy."

"Shockingly badly. Helen! have you sworn not to look at me? For goodness' sake lift your eyes!"

"If you will take your hand from mine, and if you will apologize for calling me by my Christian name, and promise——"

"I will promise anything—apologize for everything!" he cried, obliging her also in the matter of the hand, "if only you will look at me and say you forgive me."

And then, at last, she did look up. But somehow, instead of the cold and angry harshness which had

always greeted him out of their deep gray depths, there was something in her eyes that was new and unexpected—something of trouble and of vague disturbance.

“I will forgive you if you really wish it,” she said softly. “As you say, it is past, and we cannot keep up resentment forever. It would be childish, I suppose. Anything is better than this tragic and dramatic state of things. Don’t let us say anything more about it. I will try and forget that unlucky remark of yours, and I will try to be civil to you.”

“Civil! I ask for bread and you give me a stone! I want your friendship, your interest. And yet, no; that is not true—for I want more—I want more than that from you.”

He was close to her now—bending down toward her. There was passion in his voice and in his eager eyes. She arose hurriedly from her chair.

“You have no right—no right,” she stammered brokenly, and began rolling the “poor-work” hastily together with nervous, trembling hands.

“Don’t go—don’t go! Listen to me at least.”

“I cannot listen,” she answered, turning away. “You can have nothing to say to me—nothing!”

And all the time she seemed to hear a voice that cried to her, “He is false—he is false! He has already given his faith to another. You must not hear what he has to say.”

It was a cruel voice—a voice against which her heart rebelled and fought, and yet which compelled her to listen and to obey.

“Why are you frightened of me?” he persisted, following her to the foot of the staircase. “If you knew—if I might only tell you all that I want to say——”

But he never did tell her. For at that very moment

there was a little scornful laugh from over their heads, and a mocking voice cried out from the landing above:

"*Are* you two playing at hide-and-seek, may I ask? Or is it 'Catch me if you can,' or 'Kiss in the ring?'"

Mrs. Torrington, in soft, white silk—the kind of silk that does not rustle, and gives no warning of its approach—was coming down the staircase out of the gloom of the wide landing above.

Crimson with shame and annoyance, poor Helen darted upstairs, brushing by her without so much as a look or a word, and fled tumultuously along the corridor to her own room.

Dora laughed anew as she came on slowly down the staircase.

"Were you making love to Miss Dacre, Gilbert?"

He looked supremely foolish, as a man is apt to do when he is found out doing something he is ashamed of.

"My dear Dora, how perfectly ridiculous! Why should I make love to Miss Dacre, pray?"

"I am sure I don't know," with a little shrug of the shoulders; "but Uncle Ashworth's money might, perhaps, afford a clue to the mystery."

Nugent looked furious. She could hardly have said anything to anger him more. It was probably why she said it—an intimate knowledge of his character giving her the whip hand over him. He turned away from her with an oath which he took no trouble to conceal.

"You need not swear at me," she said coldly. "Of course I am not a fool, and I see a great many things you had rather I did not see; but I advise you not to provoke me with regard to Helen Dacre. You see, I can so very easily spoil your game, my poor boy, if you were to try me too far. It would be hardly worth your while to attempt it, would it?"

That evening, when dinner was over, and the ladies were alone in the drawing-room—Lady Camilla having settled herself down in her own particular arm-chair with the evening paper on her lap for her habitual after-dinner snooze—Mrs. Torrington came softly across the room and sat down on the sofa by Helen's side.

There was a conciliatory smile on her pretty childish face, and she laid her hand caressingly upon Helen's as she sat down beside her.

"My dear child, I do hope you are not vexed with me for laughing at you and Gilbert Nugent this evening?"

"Vexed, Mrs. Torrington—how could I be vexed? I fear, on the contrary, that it was I who unwittingly annoyed you." Helen felt dreadfully uncomfortable and self-conscious as she said this, and she blurted out her words lamely and nervously.

Mrs. Torrington pressed her hand affectionately, and smiled anew.

"Oh, no, my dear Helen, I was not in the very least annoyed. How could I be?" she said, sweetly. "I ought not to have laughed; but you have no idea how funny you and Gilbert looked running across the hall after each other!"

Helen reddened. To have felt oneself to be at the very crisis of one's life, and to be told afterward that one has looked "funny" in that situation, is perhaps the most galling imputation that a human being can be called upon to endure.

"I really quite thought for the first minute that you were playing at a new kind of game together. I really did!" continued Dora serenely; "but of course it was only some of Gilbert's nonsense, as he told me afterward. He is such a terrible flirt, you know. But

then, he is a dear, naughty fellow, and it means nothing at all with him."

"He told you—he told you that—that he had been flirting with me?" inquired Helen grimly, looking at her straightly with a hard, angry look in her eyes.

"Oh, not, of course, in so many words," laughed Mrs. Torrington, quite gayly. "But I understand his little ways so well, and you know I have such implicit faith in my dear Gilbert—he has been so devoted to me for years—so true and so constant, dear fellow, that I never object to his amusing himself with a pretty girl, by a little harmless flirtation. I could not be so ungenerous, could I, knowing how loving and loyal to me he really is at heart?"

There was a little silence. Helen looked straight before her. Her lips were pressed closely together, and in the eyes that her companion could not see—because she had turned her head a little away—there was the dreary blank of a miserable despair. For at that moment she knew what perhaps nothing but that grinding, aching pain at her heart could have fully revealed to her—that she loved Gilbert Nugent! When she spoke at last, there was no signal of distress to be detected in either voice or face.

"You and he are lovers, then? You love each other? It is what I had thought and guessed. I am very glad that you are happy."

Then she rose quietly from her place, and went across the room to find Lady Camilla's work-basket and the still dilapidated "poor work" of grey worsted, which she had left before dinner in a worse plight than before. She did not go back to talk to Mrs. Torrington again.

There was a tumult of anger and of misery at her heart; but worse than either was the burning anguish

of a shame which seemed to strike at her very life—shame that she should be made a sport for these two who loved one another. Perhaps he had guessed her secret—perhaps, in spite of her animosity and her resentment, he had perceived the dreadful truth which she herself had only this hour discovered—had seen through her paltry pretence of enmity, and pitied her, no doubt, for her supreme foolishness.

Well, a woman, thank God, has always her pride to fall back upon; and for all the agony that tore at her soul, Helen had the fortitude to hide her wounds, and to present a calm and smiling face to her tormentor. The sound of the door, as it opened to admit the gentlemen, went through her head like the stab of a knife.

She did not look up, but she knew that Gilbert Nugent was in the room—knew, too, that he was coming straight toward the little table where she sat at work.

“What! not done with that unfortunate ‘poor work’ yet?” said his cheery voice, close over her head. She looked up and forced herself to smile—to smile as though she did not care.

“No; it takes time, you see. Lady Camilla will be wanting it presently,” she answered mechanically, without a very clear idea of what she was saying.

Nugent sat down, as though by fatality, upon a chair next to her own.

Why did he not go to his own Dora, to whom he was so true and constant? Why did he press his meaningless attentions upon a girl whom he despised and derided?

“By the way, Helen—” she looked up quickly. Mrs. Torrington stood beside her—from the other side of the room she had swooped down upon them both. The

case was urgent and needed desperate measures. "I quite forgot to tell you—a gentleman called upon you this morning."

"A gentleman! Upon me, Mrs. Torrington?"

"Yes, and he was so sorry to miss you. He left all sorts of pretty messages with me for you. Was it not careless and stupid of me to forget to tell you about him?"

"I cannot think who you mean. Who could it have been?" said Helen, perplexedly. "I don't think I know a gentleman in the world who could possibly want to see me."

"Oh, he wanted to see you most dreadfully! I assure you I scented quite a little romance in the poor fellow's disappointed face when he found you were out. He could not call again, he said; but I was to give you his love and to say he would write to you, and he was *so*—*so* sorry to miss you—"

"My dear Mrs. Torrington, you quite bewilder me. I cannot conceive who it could have been."

Nugent was looking at her keenly. She could almost feel his eyes upon her.

"I can't remember his name, but he gave me his card. Ah, here it is! I have it in my pocket."

She laid the scrap of cardboard upon the little table between them.

There it lay—face uppermost—with its little vulgar characters staring at her.

"Mr. Frederick Warne."

Nugent read the name too. Then he looked back at her, and saw that she was as white as ashes.

"Who is it?—who is Mr. Frederick Warne when he is at home, pray?" he asked, with a sort of breathless intensity.

"He is only the nephew of my old school-mistress," she stammered.

"Is that all?" with a gasp of relief.

"Yes; that is all," she answered, and put the offending card quickly away into her pocket.

CHAPTER XIII.

A more brilliant spectacle than was to be witnessed in the Town Hall, at Oldchester, on the night of the Meadowshire Hunt Ball, it would indeed be difficult to imagine.

The large and lofty rooms, decorated with flags and colored bunting, and splendidly illuminated, were admirably suited to the purpose. The music was of the best, the supper excellent, and the floor all that could be desired. Everybody congratulated the busy stewards upon the great and unqualified success of the evening. The rooms were thronged. Never within the memory of man—said the country squires and squiresses who lined the walls, to one another—had there been known such a well-attended and thoroughly delightful ball.

Meadowshire is famous for its pretty women, and the fair sex, whose charms were for the most part enhanced by smart London-made dresses, and by many splendid and flashing diamonds, had mustered in great force; while the crowds of hunting men, in their scarlet dress-coats, added an *éclat* to the gay scene which the presence of the male sex in its depressing and dismal ordinary evening costume does not usually afford.

But numerous and dazlingly attired as were the beautiful women in the room, there were still many people who looked with interest after a tall, graceful girl clad in white, and not a few were the questions

asked, and the favorable criticisms passed concerning her.

"Lord Bainton's ward, is she? She is a very striking-looking girl," said one man to another.

"Yes; not exactly beautiful, and yet there is something almost better than beauty about her; she is very attractive."

"She is an heiress, too, I hear," said the first speaker. "Old Ashworth left her all his money."

"Lucky Lord Bainton!" ejaculated the other significantly.

"Oh! is that his game, do you suppose?"

"Bound to be, I should think. An old bachelor, when he thinks of marriage, should look out for a young and handsome wife, and the money is no drawback, naturally."

"But young Greyson was to be his heir, I thought."

"Not likely—he detests his brother-in-law. Besides, he is not the man to allow such a chance to slip."

"Ah! poor Lady Camilla. She has a formidable rival—the girl is charming."

And the two speakers moved away.

Now the whole of this conversation was overheard by no less a person than Lord Bainton himself. He was not addicted to dancing, and it was many years since he had been present at such a scene as this. But as some of the party from the house where he was staying were going to the ball, he suddenly expressed a desire to join them, and, somewhat to the surprise of his hosts, he took his place in the private omnibus when it came round to the door after dinner to convey the ball-goers a ten miles' drive into Oldchester.

The fact is, that a secret desire to see what his ward would look like at her first ball, and to notice the effect

she produced upon others, had made him determine to be present upon the occasion.

The party he was with arrived somewhat late, and it was while pressing in among the crowd about the doorway that he caught sight of the graceful, white-robed figure of his ward as she was whirled by in the throng of the waltzers, and became at the same time an unwilling listener to the conversation above recorded concerning her and himself.

After the speakers had gone, he remained for some moments leaning against the frame of the doorway, plunged in thought. It cannot be said with truth that such an idea as these two gossips had suggested was absolutely new to him, because the thought had already arisen within his heart many times before; but to hear it put into words for the first time by other people did certainly give a fresh impetus to the hitherto scarcely acknowledged desire.

"Why not?" he said to himself, as he stood there, watching the gay, revolving throng. "Why not?"

He had a shrinking horror of making himself ridiculous—a morbid terror of what people would say of him. If he had heard them call him an old fool, or a conceited donkey, it is quite possible that he would have told himself that the idea was folly; and that he would have dismissed it from his mind as impracticable. But these two men, who had discussed the subject so glibly, had not seemed to think it ridiculous at all. On the contrary.

"An old bachelor should look out for a young and handsome wife," they had said. "Well, why not—why not?"

Their words had set him thinking deeply.

As he stood there, Helen on the arm of her partner—

a young fellow who, despite his youthful appearance, was evidently an excellent dancer—passed once more close before him in the crowd. He could not help noticing with critical eyes to which a new motive for criticism was imparted, how exceedingly charming and graceful she looked. His blood, despite his sixty years, beat a little quicker in his veins at the sight of her fairness. Was all this beauty destined to be for him, perchance? He could not help drawing a picture of her in his imagination, embellished by the family diamonds which now lay uselessly in the strong box at his banker's, and adorned by all the prestige and *éclat* of his own name and position. She would become that position well, he thought. He was fond and proud of her now as his ward—he would be fonder and prouder of her still as his wife! And, after all, why not? What was there to prevent his doing as he liked? Ted Greyson was a very nice boy, certainly, and his own godson. But a man is not bound to sacrifice himself for his godson. He was fond of Camilla, and if she felt disappointed he should be sorry; but of course he could not help that. Besides, as that man had truly said, he detested his brother-in-law. Why on earth should he not consider his own claims before those of his relations? Why not, indeed?

Man being an inherently selfish animal, as is well known, seldom continues this line of argument long. The matter is very soon settled, and always in the same direction—his own favor.

Lord Bainton speedily came to the conclusion that Camilla and her son would have to go to the wall, and that he should certainly do as he liked. After which he walked across the ball-room, the waltz having just come to an end, and shook hands with his ward.

"I must congratulate you upon your toilette, my dear; upon your charming appearance altogether, and upon your evident success," he said, as he pressed her small, white-gloved hand affectionately.

Helen, flushed with her dance, and with the heat of the room, was looking her best; her eyes shone with innocent pleasure at her guardian's kind words. She was genuinely and thoroughly fond of him.

"I am so glad you like my dress," she answered, simply and gratefully.

"Is your card quite full?"

"Quite, I am afraid. But if you would like me to give up a dance and sit and talk to you——"

His face fell a little.

"Oh, you think me too old for a partner, I suppose?" he answered, with a little annoyance. "I suppose you think I have forgotten how to dance!"

"Oh, no, no! dear Lord Bainton! Of course I don't!" cried Helen eagerly. "I'll dance with you with pleasure—any dance you like."

And so the astonishing spectacle was soon displayed, to the whole town and county there assembled, of Lord Bainton standing up by his young ward's side in a set of "Lancers."

It may be imagined that Lady Camilla beheld this wonderful sight with eyes of extreme dismay and disfavor.

Her brother's face, radiant with satisfaction and beaming with smiles, filled her with horrible apprehensions. The way in which he turned toward his youthful partner, bobbing his head toward her to whisper in her ear, and bending with old-fashioned gallantry over her hand, struck her with a cold chill of consternation.

She had been right, then, in her surmises. Bainton was evidently fascinated by the girl. She had never known him distinguish any unmarried woman by such attentions. Within the memory of man no one had ever seen Lord Bainton dance before.

"It is monstrous—horrible!" she whispered to her husband, who stood by her. "He is making himself conspicuous and ridiculous to the whole room. What is to be done to stop it? Oh, Tom, think of our poor Ted. What a cruel injury it will be to his prospects!"

"I've always told you not to reckon upon your brother, my dear. Bainton was never to be trusted. He was bound to marry some day. Better put Ted's prospects out of your thoughts; he must take his chance." And then the good man, who did not take the matter very deeply to heart, moved away to speak to some acquaintances, and Lady Camilla was left to bear her trouble alone.

For it was a dreadful trouble to her. Ted was her idol, and her ambitions for him were insatiable. Old Park, though a beautiful place, was by no means a rich inheritance. Its expenses were greater than its resources. She had her husband had always lived extravagantly and quite up to the limits of their income. There had been losses, too, and charges on the estate, and old debts to be paid off. For many years Mr. Greyson had been crippled by the mountain-load of liabilities bequeathed to him by the elder brother whom he had succeeded. At his father's death Ted was certain to be a poor man, and would in all probability be unable to live upon the property he would inherit. Old Park would have to be let—possibly even to be sold. But Lady Camilla had always consoled herself by the reflection that her brother

would die unmarried, and that Ted would, as a matter of course, be his heir. For that end she had always striven; and to keep her brother without a wife had been the effort of her life. His own indolence and selfishness had helped her. Bainton had been always unwilling to burden himself with the responsibilities of matrimony, and as he grew older his bachelor habits and customs increased upon him, so that she had long ceased to fear that he would change his way of life. Now, however, all her anxieties were renewed. The advent of this handsome ward of his had revolutionized the old gentleman's existence. He had taken her abroad, he had devoted himself to her amusement, he evinced a lively interest in her progress, and even in her dresses. It was impossible to say where his infatuation would end. To-night he had actually gone out after his dinner at the risk of his digestion, and driven ten miles cramped up in a family omnibus in order to meet her at a ball; and now he was actually dancing with her! There was no knowing what would be the next step. Lady Camilla felt that despair was settling down upon her soul.

As she stood straining her eyes to watch the faces of the couple in whom she took so painful an interest, a short laugh close beside her made her turn angrily round.

"Poor dear Camilla! I really am sorry for you. It looks like an accomplished fact, doesn't it?" And Dora Torrington, with mischief in her laughing eyes, made an almost imperceptible gesture with her fair head toward the moving figures in the dance.

"It is more than half your fault!" retorted her cousin angrily. "If you had chosen you might have prevented it. You might still prevent it, in fact, if you liked."

"Prevent an old man making a fool of himself? I really don't see by what magical powers I should be able to do that."

"If the girl could be brought to refuse him."

"If?—my dear Camilla. What girl in her senses would say 'No' to the Earl of Bainton, and the property in Cheshire, and the house in Portman Square, and the family diamonds, and, best of all, to the prospect of a widow's jointure within an appreciable distance of time? No, no; your brother may be a fool—but most assuredly Helen Dacre is not one. She will jump at him!"

"Not if you would let Nugent fall in love with her, which he is quite ready to do."

"Many thanks!" and there was a vicious flash in the child-like blue eyes. "I don't seem to see it. Gilbert is a 'poor thing' doubtless, but still 'all mine own.'"

"If you were only commonly grateful to me, you would have made my brother flirt with you. It would have amused you, and done me a good service."

"Because you know very well that he never would lose his head to the point of offering marriage to me! Upon my word, Camilla, you have a most amusingly selfish way of looking at things."

"Take care, Dora—you may carry your sneers too far. As to marriage, nobody will marry you, my dear girl; neither my brother, nor Gilbert Nugent, nor anybody else!" She turned her back angrily upon her and moved away among the crowd.

A partner came up to claim Mrs. Torrington for the next dance. There was no trace of vexation or discomfiture in her smiling face as she placed her hand upon the young man's arm, and answered some trifling com-

pliment with a coquettish glance and toss of her pretty head; nor could he or any one else in the room have possibly guessed from her bright looks and pleasant manner what a tempest of rage and hatred was storming at her heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE Hunt Ball was nearly at an end. The crowd was rapidly thinning. There was room now to move about, to talk to one's friends, and to enjoy oneself without being squashed into a pancake or smashed into a jelly. Nobody now trampled upon the tails of the ladies' dresses, or stamped upon the gentlemen's patent leather pumps. Above all, there was room to dance with ease and comfort; and about fifty couples still spun vigorously and with unabated energy round and round the large square room.

Helen for the moment was not dancing—she stood a little apart watching the rest. She was not at all tired, although her dark hair was a little ruffled, and her pretty dress showed signs of the night's encounters. She had enjoyed herself on the whole very much indeed. She had danced every single dance, and she was conscious of having been admired and noticed. At twenty a young woman, however simple-minded, cannot be impervious to a success of this kind. Helen had frankly and honestly appreciated the little triumph which her fresh young charms had called forth. Her first ball had been a source of real enjoyment to her. And yet there was something wanting to her!

As she stood leaning back against the wall, fanning herself and looking at the dancers, she was quite able to put her finger accurately upon the "crumpled rose leaf" in her box. Gilbert Nugent had not once asked her to dance. The realization of this was very bitter to her. What was the admiration of other men to her

if his was wanting? Did he, indeed, scorn and despise her so much? Had he guessed her unmaidenly secret? and did he feel a contemptuous dislike to the girl, who, not satisfied with robbing him of his birthright, had also shown to him too plainly the shameful weakness of her heart?

Poor Helen tortured herself with these perplexing questions. But while she stood there nursing her wounded pride and her disappointed hopes, the object of her secret thoughts stood suddenly before her.

"Not dancing, Miss Dacre? What a piece of luck for me! Come and have a turn."

Before she could frame an answer, Nugent had passed his arm round her waist and had borne her lightly out into the middle of the room.

Gilbert was a perfect dancer, and the keen physical enjoyment of waltzing with him was, for the first few moments, all that Helen could think about.

When they stopped at last, after three or four turns round the room, Helen exclaimed a little breathlessly—

"That was indeed lovely. I have not had such a waltz the whole evening."

Her eyes were glowing, her face flushed. The pure joy of being with the man who had become, by some wonderful miracle, suddenly dear to her, lent a new tenderness and charm to her whole aspect. Nugent had never yet seen her like this.

He gave a swift glance round the room. Dora was nowhere to be seen. He had left her at the supper-table between two attentive youths, safely engaged with a plateful of *galantine aux truffes*. He had reckoned, guilty man, that it would take her at least twenty minutes to get through that plate alone, to say nothing of the possibilities of jellies and grapes to follow.

"Do you know," he said, looking back at his partner, "that the principal reason I have for dancing with you is that I may ask you a question?"

"What a formidable announcement! it sounds alarming."

"It is not alarming at all, Miss Dacre. But my question is a serious one—to me at least."

Helen's heart beat a little quickly.

"Don't keep me in suspense then," she laughed nervously. "Pray ask your question, Mr. Nugent."

"Ah! but will you answer it?"

"Certainly, if I can."

"You can certainly answer it—but will you? Will you answer it faithfully and truthfully?"

"I don't think I am untruthful," said Helen, in a low voice.

"Forgive me. Promise me, then, that whatever your reply may be, it shall at least be a perfectly honest and true one?"

Vaguely disturbed, she hardly knew why, Helen gave him the required promise.

"*You will* tell me the truth, then?" he repeated, as though unable to insist sufficiently often upon this point.

"Yes, I will certainly tell you the truth," she said once more. She had not the vaguest idea what his question was likely to be.

"I am going to tell you something first—something that I will put into a little parable," he began. "I do not ask you to say one word about that—only to listen to my foolish story, so that when you have heard it you may give me a plain answer, 'Yes' or 'No,' to what I shall ask you afterward. Listen. There was a poor beggar who had not a penny in the world—luck had always been dead against him—and, in addition to his

poverty, he was tied by the leg to a great heavy load of stone, which he had to drag about after him wherever he went. The stone had been only a very small one when, years ago, he himself had allowed it to be fastened on; but by degrees it had grown bigger and bigger, and the chains became heavier and stronger, so that he did not know how to get rid of it. One day he saw a chance of escape; or, rather, he saw something which made him think that it might be worth his while to struggle for freedom. It was just a half-opened door—a door that led, I think, into heaven. It was impossible to drag his stone with him through that golden threshold. If he hoped ever to cross it he must first get rid of that hideous weight—he must do battle, and fight for his liberty. This is what he longed to do. But there came a warning voice—an evil voice, that mocked him—and the voice told him that he would be wasting his time, because the angel who guarded the door he longed to enter would only shut it in his face were he to present himself before the entrance; so that he had better be wise in time, and go on dragging about his chains and his burden to the end of the chapter. That is my little story, Miss Dacre. What do you think about that poor fellow?”

“I think he would be a coward not to rid himself of such an incubus as you describe at whatever cost, not because of any angel, but for his own sake, and for the sake of his own manliness and honor.”

She spoke impetuously and hotly. The story did not seem to apply to herself, nor to anybody she knew. Nugent was looking at her intently and earnestly. He saw that she had not understood his meaning.

“Now for my question then. And pray remember to look upon it as the context of my parable. A few

days ago, Miss Dacre, a gentleman appears to have called upon you and left his card——”

Every scrap of color left her face.

“It would, of course, be an impertinence on my part, were I to question you concerning your friends and your visitors. You were good enough to inform us that this gentleman is a nephew of the schoolmistress who brought you up. He is presumably, therefore, an old friend.”

“Yes,” she gasped, “you are right: an old friend.”

“Now, tell me the truth. Remember, you have promised me the truth. Is he not more than a friend?”

A dead silence. The meaning of the story he had told her flashed upon her fully. He himself was the man; the weight of stone of whom he was tired was Dora, to whom he was engaged, and whom he longed to be rid of; and the open door—the angel he longed to reach. Ah! it was all clear as daylight to her now! Gilbert Nugent loved her.

In the tumult of this wonderful discovery she could not utter a word. Her heart beat so wildly that instinctively she pressed her hand against the bodice of her dress. Her color went and came. A great and rapturous joy throbbed through every pulse of her being.

A swift flash of her tell-tale eyes met his face and told her that he was watching her with an intense eagerness, waiting for her to speak.

“Is he more to you than friend?” he asked her once again. “Yes or no. I want no more.”

She would have to answer him. A horrible faintness came over her. How was she to tell him the horrible truth?—how, in one word, to dash away the cup of happiness forever from her lips? He had asked her for truth; but how was she to speak the truth which would

plunge her forever into the dark hopelessness of an absolute despair? No; she could not do it! She would rid herself of Frederick Warne, of his hateful pretensions, of the hold which, in the days of her foolish ignorance, she had allowed him to gain over her. She would write to him—break off everything; appeal to her guardian for protection against him, if necessary; but she would not continue to be bound to so detestable an individual any longer.

Gilbert Nugent loved her! For her sake he was ready to shake himself free of Mrs. Torrington and her claims upon him. For her sake, that is, if she were worthy of the sacrifice. Would he think her so if he knew that she was Frederick Warne's betrothed? Oh! she could not own to such a degradation.

So the temptation was too much, and the lie—that lie whose consequences were to be so terrible to her—was spoken, never, alas! to be recalled or retrieved.

"No," she said at length, slowly and deliberately.

"He is nothing to you?"

"Nothing," she said once more.

But she did not dare to look up or meet his eyes with that lie upon her lips. She heard the long-drawn breath of relief and exultation.

He murmured—

"Thank God!" followed after a brief pause by a question whispered in her ear—

"Then there is hope for me?"

She only bent her head mutely in assent. And without another word he passed his arm round her waist and whirled her out into the middle of the room.

In that delightful, never-to-be-forgotten waltz, was it indeed all Helen's fancy that he held her more closely and tenderly than before—that his eyes flashed with an

unwonted passion into hers—and that there was in the young man's whole being an intensity of exultant excitement of which she could not understand the cause?

And yet all the time—above the delirious throbbing of her own heart, above the siren-strains of the dance music—a voice deep down within her seemed to say—

“Enjoy yourself while you may, you poor fool!—it will not last. It is but a stolen joy to which you have no right—a false and unreal happiness which an avenging Nemesis will soon snatch away from you forever.”

Even the music seemed after a while only to be an echo of the warning words; so that, with every throb of the air, she seemed to hear, over and over again—

“It will not last—it will not last!”

Nothing lasts. The waltz came, as a matter of course, to an end, and just as Nugent deposited his breathless partner upon a low couch at the end of the room he looked up and beheld Mrs. Torrington entering the door at the further side of it.

Her quick eyes saw him in a moment. There was a flash of anger, of disapproval, in them which Nugent, who knew every look in the face too well, was able to understand with perfect accuracy. A shadow came over his own face—all the brightness went out of it. He rose hastily, and offering his arm to Helen murmured something about finding Lady Camilla.

“I expect it is time to go—she will be looking for her party,” he explained, as they walked across the wide and now nearly empty ball-room.

“Everything,” he added, with a little half-awkward laugh, “everything, you know, comes to an end.”

“Yes, everything comes to an end,” repeated Helen lifelessly, and, somehow, all at once the brightness and beauty about her seemed to become extinguished.

Lady Camilla came forward to tell her she was going home. Lord Bainton tucked her hand under his arm to take her to the cloak-room. She submitted listlessly to be carried away. What did it matter? It was all over! The ball, and the little success she had had—and everything else—it was over!

Five minutes later Gilbert Nugent was wrapping a large fur-lined plush mantle round Dora Torrington's white shoulders.

"You were quite wrong," he whispered to her. "Miss Dacre is not, as you imagined, engaged to that young man of inferior aspect."

"Is she not?" replied the widow, with a languid smile. "I wonder why he writes to her then, twice a week!"

Nugent presumably was left to wonder, too.

CHAPTER XV.

"AT last!" exclaimed Mr. Frederick Warne aloud to himself, as he entered his shabby little sitting-room from the bedroom door beyond, and examined the letters that lay on the table by the side of the breakfast tray.

His landlady had just brought in his morning repast. It did not look very tempting. On the battered black japanned tray, that was guiltless of the luxury of a table napkin, stood a metal teapot, a cup and saucer of coarse ware, a large slop basin filled with sugar, and a small milk jug containing a bluish fluid. Between two plates reposed a few slices of greasily-cooked bacon, while a flabby cottage loaf and a pat of pale and unwholesome-looking butter completed the arrangements. Mr. Warne, probably because he knew no better, did not seem dissatisfied with the fare. He sat down to the table, poured himself out a cup of bitter-flavored tea, and took a mouthful or two of the greasy bacon before turning once more to his letters; and then with a gleam of evident satisfaction in his eyes he selected one from the rest and broke open the envelope.

"Time she did write," he murmured, as he extracted the letter—a short one, apparently, for the outer sheet was blank. "Three letters of mine and no answer. It is a most reprehensible habit of Helen's—that of leaving her letters unanswered. However, doubtless she is now penitent," and then he proceeded to read the epistle.

It was quite short, and not in the least what Mr. Warne expected.

DEAR FREDERICK:—I am writing to ask you to release me from my engagement to you. I find that I do not love you sufficiently to become your wife. I am sure you will agree with me that under these circumstances we should not be happy together. Pray write by return of post, and give me back my promise, and also send back to me some letters of mine which you have.—Always your sincere friend,
HELEN DACRE.

As Mr. Warne read this brief and explicit document, his jaw fell, and a look of consternation that was almost comic overspread his countenance.

For some months past he had been dwelling with considerable satisfaction upon the fact that he was engaged to be married to a lady with thirty thousand pounds of her own. His new appointment was comfortable enough. It might, perhaps, have satisfied his aspirations in the old days when he had looked for nothing better; but new hopes and ambitions had lately arisen in the young man's breast, and the Classical Professorship at the Girls' High School, with the free lodging thrown in, no longer contented him.

For what might he not do with thirty thousand pounds? He would found and build a school of his own—a school upon a particular pattern of his own fancy, which he had long had in his mind. The education should be cheap but sound. There should be resident pupils and day boarders. The latter might be expected to flock in in almost limitless numbers. He would have one wing of the building—that was to be erected with Helen's money—devoted to classical studies, the other to mathematics, modern languages, and science. There should be nothing frivolous taught.

It should be a training school for earnest-minded young women of the middle classes. There must be thousands of such young women waiting and longing to be so trained. Nothing should be spared to make the programme attractive. The professors should be men of learning and distinction; the lady principal, a woman of high attainment. There should be scholarships to Girton and Newnham, and certificates of first and second class merits. There should be a lecture hall, and a debating society. The prospectuses should set forth all this in glowing language, and with such a sum as thirty thousand pounds at his back the thing was bound to be a gigantic success, while he himself, as head and principal of the school, would reign supreme; and at the same time gather in the profits rapidly and satisfactorily. These had been his dreams—no more, no less. To raise himself above the beaten path of educational work presented no attraction to him. His sluggish soul conceived no higher joy than to be the big man of his own establishment in his own accustomed line of life. To teach, to admonish, to lay down laws for everybody else, was the very breath of his being. He could not have existed without it; and thus his day dreams included no scheme for his own luxury or enjoyment. Only this practical and thoroughly prosaic ambition: to remain a schoolmaster still, on a broader and more lucrative basis.

In his own way he was fond of Helen; but as to the part which she was to play in his future he troubled himself very little. It was her money which was so necessary to him. She would, of course, be a presentable and creditable wife, and her attitude of reverent and submissive adoration of her husband would be no doubt of infinite benefit to her and of much comfort to

himself. He dismissed her thus, very briefly, from his mind. What he could not dismiss, was the present difficulty which barred the way to the initial step of his future career, so that he was at the very outset powerless to advance.

When he had read Helen's note three or four times over he came to the conclusion that she was the victim of evil influences. Lord Bainton was evidently his enemy. The man's insolence to himself had been marked. Why should he, Frederick Warne, a superior and learned man, in a responsible position of life, be treated with such contumely by an overbearing member of the aristocracy?

"Why, pray, am I not good enough for Helen Dacre?" he asked of himself aloud, with virtuous indignation. It seemed to him, indeed, that he was more than good enough. The advantages, bar that little matter of the money, were entirely on Helen's side. She was young, unformed, girlish, and ignorant in many ways; and he himself was a man of erudition and experience. If anything, the balance was all in her favor. A union with him, then, would be an inestimable advantage to her. She was, indeed, but little fitted to mate with a man so infinitely her superior in mental acquirements. Moreover—as to that money—who could say that his motives were mercenary? He had been willing to marry her when she had only forty pounds a year. Was it not fair and right that he should marry her now? Lord Bainton, in the days of her poverty, had taken no notice of her whatever. Who was he that he should come now between her and her betrothed husband?

The more he thought about it, the more clear it became to him that he possessed an unalterable right to possess himself of that thirty thousand pounds, and

to devote it forthwith to an excellent and admirable object.

He rose when he had finished his breakfast, and went and stood at his window. It was a third-floor window and looked out on to the courtyard of the High School. Across the open space, in twos and threes—in groups and singly—the girl students were hurrying to take their places for the morning's lecture. He himself was to give the lecture—a lecture upon Greek literature. His subject was all prepared; his notes lay ready on the table behind him. He looked forward to his task with pleasure and a certain sense of importance. He liked lecturing to girls. The sea of fair young faces reverently and silently turned up to his own pandered to his vanity and soothed his sense of unappreciated superiority.

He told himself that he possessed the talent. Why then should he not have the money which would give him the power and the influence as well?

It was his by right. Helen should not upset all these important schemes for his future for the mere perversity of a childish caprice!

It was a Wednesday—a half-holiday. When his morning duties were over, he was due at Aberdare House to teach Latin grammar to the big girls at his aunt's school. He did not like teaching them nearly so well as the middle-class young ladies. These well-born damsels had a careless way of receiving his instructions which annoyed him. Sometimes he even fancied they turned him into ridicule; and on one terrible occasion he had found upon the floor, after the class retired, a horrible pen-and-ink sketch which he feared—he very sadly feared—might be intended for his august self.

It represented a very ugly man in a flowing beard and spectacles, with sundry other facial peculiarities that were not altogether unfamiliar to him, and beneath the portrait was written, "Ugly Old Snuff-bags in his Gig-lamps."

Frederick, with a wisdom beyond his years, put the hateful caricature quickly into the fire and said nothing about it to anybody; but it burnt in his memory very much longer than it burnt in the grate, and it added a certain acrimony to his lessons at Aberdare House ever after.

When he got to Cleare's Common to-day, contrary to his usual habit he went first into his aunt's study instead of going at once to the class-room.

Miss Fairbrother was dozing gently in her arm-chair. She dozed a great deal now—more than she used to do when the dark-eyed pupil teacher, whom she had brought up from a child, was living with her. The work of the school was in no way neglected, because she had competent teachers to look after the young ladies, but beyond overlooking a few examination papers and reading daily prayers and presiding at meals, she did very little herself now.

When her nephew came in she roused herself and pretended that she was reading the book on the "Chemical Action of Herbaceous Plants," which, for precaution's sake, she had laid upon her knee before she went to sleep. Miss Fairbrother always liked it to be supposed that she read works of an instructive nature when she was in the seclusion of her study, and, in case any of the governesses or girls came in unexpectedly, it was always as well to be provided with a volume of a serious character.

She clutched at the book when she heard the door

open behind her, but on perceiving her nephew laid it aside again and welcomed him with a smile. He sat himself down with a serious aspect by her side, and took Helen Dacre's note out of his pocket.

"I have received this morning a letter, my dear aunt, which has annoyed me extremely, and which I must request you to read and give me your advice upon."

Miss Fairbrother took the letter from his hand and read it.

"It is infamous!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "It is dishonorable, unwomanly! Can this be the girl I brought up so carefully and judiciously? Oh, my dear Frederick, she is unworthy of you."

"I greatly fear so, aunt," replied Warne modestly. "I greatly fear it. I would not indeed waste another thought upon this poor misguided child; but," and here his eyes and Miss Fairbrother's suddenly met, "there are other considerations."

The look of mutual comprehension lasted but a second; the "considerations" were not put into actual words. There would perhaps have been a lack of delicacy in doing so; but it is quite certain that they understood one another. Miss Fairbrother nodded her head several times.

"Yes, yes," she murmured, with a feeling sigh. "My poor boy, you have your rights—your undoubted rights."

"It is exactly what I feel, my dear aunt. But how am I to enforce those rights?" There was a moment of silence. Miss Fairbrother suggested nothing, and presently Frederick spoke again.

"This poor child has been drawn into the vortex of the world. The pleasures and dissipations of a frivolous society have turned her head, and enticed her away

from those nobler aspirations of her girlhood implanted by your tuition. I feel that she ought to be rescued."

"Like a brand from the burning," murmured Miss Fairbrother, nodding her head once more. But how the brand was to be rescued it was somewhat difficult to say.

"You will, of course, not release her from her promises?"

"Of course not."

"Nor return her letters?"

"Decidedly not."

"Is there—is there anything in any of them, my dear boy—that might—might——"

"Yes," very promptly, "I have a letter of hers in which she makes use of the words, 'Our marriage,' and goes on to say further, 'when I am your wife.' It was in the first week of our engagement."

"Ah! that is good—decidedly good."

"You are thinking of a breach of promise, aunt?"

"I think you might with advantage hold such a contingency over her," admitted Miss Fairbrother. "Do not give her back her letters."

"I will not, aunt. I never intended to." He rose to go to his work; but at this moment the neat parlor maid entered bearing the second post letters on a tray.

Frederick had already reached the door when Miss Fairbrother called him back.

There was a look of excitement on her face. Her hands, which held an open letter, trembled, and her old eyes shot quick glances at her nephew. She motioned to the parlor maid, who lingered to replenish the fire, to leave the room.

As soon as she was alone with him, she cried breathlessly:

"Here is indeed the finger of Providence, Frederick! Something wonderful—astonishing! You came to me for advice, and now this totally unexpected letter has been put into my hands in order that I may guide and advise you. Listen!

"MADAM,—You have, I believe, a nephew named Mr. Frederick Warne. If he is in any way interested in the future of Miss Helen Dacre advise him to come at once to the neighborhood where she is now residing. If he does not enforce his claim I warn him that *another* will supplant him and carry away the prize that might easily be his.

AN UNKNOWN FRIEND."

Miss Fairbrother read this communication aloud from the first word to the last, and then a dead silence fell upon the two, and they looked at one another without a word.

"An anonymous letter!" murmured Warne, at length, below his breath, with rather a shocked air. Such a thing had never come across the respectable experiences of his life before.

Miss Fairbrother turned the envelope over and over in a puzzled manner.

"What is the post-mark?"

"It is a London post-mark," she answered. "That tells one nothing."

"And you cannot make a guess at the handwriting?"

The old lady shook her head. "You see it says a 'friend.' It is meant well. In fact, as I said, it is providential. You must act upon it, Frederick."

"You think so, aunt?" He was a little doubtful. A lingering of good taste and good feeling seemed to knock at the portals of that small and shrunken receptacle where he kept his conscience, and to warn him against that snake-like letter

"I have heard—I have been told that it is better not to notice anonymous communications—that they should be burnt," he said doubtfully.

"Don't be a fool, Frederick," replied his aunt tartly, as she folded up the missive and put it safely away in her reticule. "I am not going to burn the letter, and you are going down to Meadowshire to-morrow. You'll lose that money if you don't, as sure as I sit here."

This argument was bound to prevail.

"Who can 'Another' mean?" was Frederick's only rejoinder.

"Go and see. But it is probably the Earl of Bainton himself."

Frederick uplifted his hands and eyes in holy horror. "The pharisaical old reprobate!" he exclaimed. "What wickedness there is in the world!" and then he went his way to teach Valpy's Latin Exercises to the young ladies in the next room.

CHAPTER XVI.

L'Union fait la force, says the French proverb, and call it by what name you will—combination, coalition, or collaboration—there is not a doubt of it that two heads are better than one, and that a partnership in any cause, either good or bad, is the best way to work to make that cause succeed.

This idea had suggested itself very strongly to Mrs. Torrington on the morning after the Hunt ball. It was not the least use in the world, she reflected, for her to make an enemy of Lady Camilla. A quarrel with her cousin and hostess would not help her in the very least, and would, in point of fact, be extremely unpleasant in its consequences, for a great deal of the pleasure and profit of her existence accrued to her from her periodical and long visits to Old Park. She had no desire whatever to quarrel with her bread-and-butter.

So she determined to join forces with Lady Camilla in order to fight the common enemy together.

Helen Dacre must be got rid of. She could not, it is true, be poisoned or shut up in a dungeon, or done away with in any of the mediæval methods common to melodrama; but she might not impossibly be sent back with disgrace to that humble position of life out of which she had been so unfortunately lifted, and there left to languish in well-merited obscurity.

Mrs. Torrington remembered the young man with the horrible hat and boots, and the unexplained mys-

tery that had surrounded his appearance, and went and knocked at Lady Camilla's door.

The conference lasted for some time.

Dora explained to her cousin satisfactorily that the same object actuated them both—namely, the total obliteration of Helen Dacre from the scene of her present evil doings.

"I don't want her to marry Gilbert Nugent, and you don't want her to marry your brother," she said.

"If she doesn't marry the one it seems to me that she must marry the other," answered her ladyship despondingly.

"Not at all, my dear Camilla, not at all. There is a third alternative open to her—she can marry somebody else."

"Somebody else! And where are we to find that somebody else, pray? *Two* lovers are certainly enough for the girl. Where are we to find a third?"

"He is found already."

"You don't mean it—really? How do you know?"

"I found him," replied Dora, with the calm assurance of a secure position. And then she proceeded to tell Lady Camilla all about the inferior-looking young man in the ill-made clothes whom she herself had encountered at the door, and how Helen had turned pale and red at the sight of the card which he had left for her—although she had stated that he was nothing but the nephew of her old schoolmistress."

"But it is my conviction," she added sapiently, "that she is engaged, if not actually married to the creature; for I am almost certain that he writes to her frequently. She looks so guilty about it, too. Well, then, of course, Gilbert must needs take a lively interest in the matter."

"Ah! He is in love with her, as I told you before," Lady Camilla could not help saying.

"Nothing of the sort!" replied the widow with asperity. "It is Bainton who is in love with her. Gilbert only wants her money."

"Well—we wont quarrel about it, my dear—go on."

And the little passage of arms being over, Dora proceeded with her tale.

"Gilbert—like the silly fool he is—spoke to me about it, asked me if I thought Hēlen Dacre was engaged to be married to some one she had known in her former life. Not satisfied with what I told him, it appears that he asked her himself at the ball last night, and he informed me quite triumphantly that there was no truth in it, and that she had denied all connection with the man. It's my belief she told him a lie, and that is what I mean to find out. Will you help me, Camilla?"

"I don't see how we are to discover."

"Don't you? Well, I think I do. Listen to me." And then the ladies fell into conversation of so earnest and private a nature that it is scarcely possible to follow the thread of it in all its windings. Pens and ink were brought into requisition after a time, and a great deal of whispering and consulting went on over the writing-table, besides the wholesale destruction of a great many sheets of Lady Camilla's best writing-paper.

To make a long story short, the result of the confabulation was the anonymous letter.

It was by Lady Camilla's advice that this precious document was addressed to Miss Fairbrother, and not to her nephew. To begin with, there was a security about the old lady's direction, which was well known to her old pupil; whereas the dwelling-place of her

nephew—if, indeed, he was her nephew—seemed to be shrouded in vague uncertainty. If there was no nephew no harm would be done, if the nephew existed he would be quite certain to see the letter.

The caligraphy was undertaken entirely by Mrs. Torrington. She had a pretty little talent for feigning divers styles of handwriting, and she exercised it with great dexterity on the present occasion. It was, in fact, quite impossible to guess from the internal evidence of it whether the letter was written by a man or by a woman. When it was finished off to the satisfaction of both the fair conspirators it was sent under cover to an intimate friend of Dora Torrington's who lived in London, with a request that it might be dropped into the nearest pillar-box at the earliest opportunity.

After which the two ladies kissed each other with great effusion, and the new alliance was cemented by many words of endearment and affection on either side.

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the web which her enemies were weaving for her discomfiture, Helen Dacre, mounted on Sunflower, was riding slowly homeward through the winding lanes. She had somehow missed the hounds to-day and had got thrown out of the running, and so being a little tired with her last night's ball, and a little more inclined, perhaps, for dreaming than practice she had decided upon riding home by herself.

The girl was quite happy. A little smile hovered upon her lips, and a sort of warm glow—the reflex of something soft and tender at her heart—shone in the depths of her dark and speaking eyes. She knew of no reason why she should not be happy. The world she had come to live in was very fair to her. She seemed to possess everything that it could give her—pleasure,

luxury, and kind friends; and now, last, best gift of all, love itself was hers! Wherever she turned smiles and flattering words met her. Everybody was kind to her. She knew, of course, that it was her money that had done all this; but, then, there was no bitterness in that knowledge, for oh! what a lovely world of affection and sympathy had that magical golden key not opened to her!

The little barricade which, in her girlish foolishness, she had built up against the man she loved was all broken down now. How glad she was that this was so! Whatever she had felt of rage and anger against him at the first she knew quite well now must have all melted away into love and pity in that hour when he had laid helpless and unconscious stretched upon the sodden earth at her feet. From that hour, no doubt, pride had died, and love had sprung up into life in its stead. And now, although she recognized perfectly that there lay a whole wilderness of doubts and fears and difficulties between her and him, yet across that gulf he had reached out his longing hands to her, and it seemed to her that in time all would be overcome, all perils vanish away, and he and she, whose hearts had cried out in the darkness to one another, be made one at last in the triumph of full and cloudless sunshine.

It was the happy dream of a young girl. She asked herself neither the ways nor the means. All that should be left to him. She would be patient; she would trust in him and wait for him. She had done her part quickly and promptly. She had employed her first waking moments in writing a few brief lines to that other man whom she could not even think of without shame and contrition. She had done all she could to undo the lie she had spoken last night. The lie had

become the truth, and she was nothing now to Frederick Warne—nothing. That lie already lay on her conscience no longer. The only thing that troubled her was Dora Torrington—Dora who believed in him who had bound herself to him. But for the certain and instinctive knowledge that Mrs. Torrington was unworthy of him, Helen would have been miserable to think that Nugent had been false to the little widow for her sake; even as it was she was vaguely uneasy.

But she consoled herself by reflecting that no doubt it was a one-sided affair, and that Dora was an undesirable wife for such a one as Gilbert Nugent. Still he must have loved her once. Alas! that love should fade and alter and die. It seemed to her very sad; but perhaps it was unavoidable. Lady Camilla had told her that men were changeable, and he had let her see how irksome was his position with regard to Dora, and had appealed to her—Helen Dacre—to free him from it.

A woman forgives much to a man if only he loves her. His love to herself excused him in her eyes for his perfidy to another. For a man's falseness or fickleness is never wholly odious to the woman for whose sake he is false or fickle.

As she rode slowly along, full of happy fancies and of sweet, intangible dreams of all that the future might bring to her, a horseman came into view far away along the narrow lane behind her. No sooner had he caught sight of her well-groomed chestnut horse and his graceful rider than, putting his own horse into a sharp trot, he came up quickly and overtook her.

She turned round at the sound of the advancing steps, and waved her hand gayly as she recognized her guardian.

"Riding homeward, my dear Helen? How is this?" he exclaimed, as he reached her side.

"I lost the hounds somehow. I was on the wrong side of the covert when the fox broke, and somehow I went the wrong way, and could not catch them up," exclaimed Helen.

"You want some one to take care of you in the hunting field; you have not enough experience to be so independent. Why did you not follow me?"

"I miss Ted horribly," she answered, ignoring his last question, at which she smiled internally, for Lord Bainton, although he had been a fine horseman in his day, had grown fat and heavy, and his cautious career across country through gaps and gates, and by circuitous courses along the roads, would not at all have commended itself to the adventurous spirit of his young ward.

"Oh, Ted is a scatterbrain young monkey! You want somebody steadier than Ted to look after you."

Helen made no answer for some minutes. They rode along in silence together between the wet and straggling hedgerows that glittered in the winter sun on either side.

"Your rashness makes me very anxious," said the earl presently. "You are foolhardy, my dear, because you are ignorant of the dangers you run."

"I will be more careful, dear Lord Bainton."

There was another pause; then Bainton said, rather suddenly—

"I am going away this afternoon. I am obliged to be in London. There is a lawsuit concerning one of my tenants, in which I am mixed up. I must leave you here, of course, with my sister, as we arranged. But before I go I want to say something to you."

"Yes?" she said, with but a languid interest. No doubt he wished to enjoin more prudence upon her.

"You need not give me an answer at all—in fact, I don't want an answer now. I had rather you took your time and thought it over."

She perceived with surprise that he spoke with nervousness—Was it something about her money? Had she been extravagant?

"I wish," he blurted out, "I wish you to be my wife."

"Oh—Lord Bainton!"

"Pray say nothing—I do not require an answer. Any time within six months you can tell me—Don't speak now—good-by," and he pressed his heels into his horse, who bounded forward at a brisk canter, and in three minutes he had disappeared round a turn of the road.

CHAPTER XVII.

IF a thunderbolt had rent the skies and fallen at her feet, Helen could not have been more astounded, or indeed more horrified, than by Lord Bainton's extraordinary and totally unexpected words.

For the first few seconds she felt positively stunned; but after a minute or two she began to realize her position, and it overwhelmed her with the bitterness of a great and terrible disappointment.

She had learnt to love Bainton as a father. To the orphan girl, whose recollection of her own parents was no more than a dim memory of a distant childhood, the tender and protecting care of this kind and polished elderly gentleman had been unspeakably precious. It had seemed to her that he had been expressly sent in the time of her sorest need and loneliness to take the place of her own dead father, and to supply all those sweet ties of family and home from which she had been for ever shut out. Her gratitude to him was unbounded; her reverence and respect without limit; and her love for him was of a sweet and filial nature, such as a daughter would have experienced. Now all these happy delusions were shattered at a single blow. The charming peace and security of her relations with him were utterly destroyed, and all the confidence and trust she had placed in him rudely and cruelly shaken.

It was a moral shock to her.

A sense of disgust with him, with herself, with life itself, overpowered her. The almost sacred nature of

the affection she had entertained for him, and which she had believed him to return toward her, seemed all at once to be degraded and vulgarized. She had looked up to him as a child, and he, a man old enough to have been in truth her grandfather, desired to marry her. The bare thought of such a union—of his sixty years against her twenty—of this veritable May and December—filled her with unspeakable loathing and repulsion. She almost hated him. It was worse—oh, a million times worse—even than Frederick Warne!

When she found herself at a later hour sitting opposite to him at the luncheon table she could not bear to speak to him or even to meet his eyes. A sense of shame and disgrace seemed to oppress her—shame for him that he should have fallen from the pedestal upon which she had placed him, and disgrace to herself that she should be the object of aspirations so unworthy of him.

Her confusion and embarrassment were, however, in no way shared by her guardian. He chatted and talked with his usual spirits, without in any way seeming to notice his ward's averted looks and constrained manner.

The three ladies were his only companions at the lunch table. Mr. Greyson and Nugent, more fortunate or more persevering than Helen, had kept up with the hounds, and were now enjoying an excellent run across a fine bit of country after a second fox that had been started later in the day.

The brougham had been ordered at three o'clock to take the earl to the station, where his friends had undertaken that his luggage should meet him. When he had finished a somewhat hasty lunch he excused himself to his sister, and rose abruptly from the table.

"I must go and see about the gun-case I left here,

Camilla," he remarked, as he left the dining-room; "and there was a cartridge-case and a whip of mine too, somewhere." The door closed behind him, and instantly and without a word Helen rose from her place and followed him out of the room. Lady Camilla and Dora remained staring speechlessly at one another.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the widow. Lady Camilla was white with anger and fear.

"Bold, brazen girl!" she ejaculated. "What does she do that for? Oh, Dora, you don't think, do you, that we are too late, and that she has already got hold of him? What shall I do? Shall I follow her?"

"Not for the world. Sit still; pretend not to notice her. If she is engaged to him we can do nothing yet. We must wait till he has gone away. Don't awaken his suspicions by seeming to watch him."

"It is terrible!" gasped Lady Camilla. "My poor deluded brother!"

"Deluded fiddlesticks!" ejaculated Mrs. Torrington irreverently. "Bainton is old enough to take care of himself."

"And you advise me, then, to sit by and see this iniquity perpetrated?" cried her cousin excitedly.

"I advise you nothing of the sort, my dear. Take my word for it, your brother has not committed himself yet. Old men are cautious; they do not rush into matrimonial engagements in a hurry. They have to weigh all the *pros* and *cons* first, to see if it will be to their advantage or disadvantage to take a wife. You may depend upon it that Bainton will have to consult his lawyer, his physician, possibly even his cook, before making up his mind that it will be desirable and compatible to himself to change his manner of life. There is plenty of time."

"Then, why has she rushed out in that impetuous way?"

"Because girls never understand how to manage a man. They either chill him with too much reserve or bore him with too much effusion. Our young friend rushes, apparently, from one extreme to the other."

Meanwhile Lord Bainton and Helen were standing face to face outside in the hall.

"My dear, I don't want you to say anything at all," the earl was repeating with gentle insistence.

"I must speak. I cannot let you go without speaking. I *must* tell you that what you have said to me is impossible."

Bainton shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Nothing is impossible, my dear child."

"Yes, yes," she persisted breathlessly, "this thing is quite, quite impossible. Oh! why—why did you spoil everything by saying it?" She wrung her hands together, and there were tears in her eyes as she turned her head away from him.

"Pray do not distress yourself, Helen," he said kindly, taking her hand into his. "You are surprised and a little upset, I dare say, now. It has been rather sudden for you, my dear child; but believe me, you will get accustomed to the idea very soon. Only don't let it trouble you. You see there is no hurry at all. Now promise me just to put it out of your mind for the present."

"I cannot! I cannot! It is right to you that I should tell you at once that I can never be your wife."

"No; you must tell me nothing of the sort. You have not yet thought it over, and I do not want any answer from you for a long time. 'Never' is a long day, my dear child, and we can, none of us, foretell

how soon circumstances may effect a change in our wishes."

Afterward Helen had cause to remember those words of Lord Bainton's. They were destined to come back to her mind almost with the force of a prophecy. Just now she was too much distressed and upset to pay much attention to them. She only did what a woman often does when she is hard driven and perplexed—she burst into tears.

Her guardian laid his hand with a fatherly tenderness upon her shoulder.

"My dear little girl, do not be unhappy. Believe me, I only desire to do everything in the world to please you. I am very fond of you, Helen, and I think that the safest solution of the problems and difficulties of your position will be to do as I have suggested. But I do not wish you to be worried or troubled. I only ask you to think it over—that commits you to nothing at all, you know. Only, remember that I shall not change, and that at any moment I shall be as I am now—entirely and wholly at your feet and at your service."

The men servants were coming into the hall from the back premises with the earl's gun-case and a bundle of rugs, the brougham was at the door,—there was no further opportunity for private conversation, even if at that moment the two ladies had not entered from the dining-room. Helen was still brushing away her tears, and Lady Camilla threw a quick glance of keen suspicion at her.

"Crying!" she thought angrily. "Now, I wonder what on earth that is for? I've no patience with the girl's sly ways. And my brother, who is always such a fool about a woman's tears!"

Five minutes later the good-bys had been spoken

and Lord Bainton was gone, and Helen, as she watched the brougham disappear down the avenue, and turned away wearily from the window, could not help thinking that, in spite of the madness and folly of his desiring to become her husband, he was perhaps her best and truest friend, and that his presence afforded her a strength and protection which in his absence she sorely needed.

The events of the next few days acted one upon the other with a singular coherence. Circumstances, partly accidental and partly preconcerted, played upon each other with an extraordinary fatality.

After Lord Bainton's departure to London, the next thing which happened at Old Park was of so trivial a nature as to appear entirely unimportant, and yet it was by no means so.

When the gentlemen came back from hunting, late in the afternoon, Nugent asked his hostess's permission to absent himself for two days from her house. He had received an invitation from some friends at the further side of the county. There was to be a big shoot, a wholesale slaughter of pheasants, and, as an undeniable shot, Nugent's gun was much in demand on these occasions. "I shall not be back till after dinner on the day after to-morrow," he explained, "and the next day, Lady Camilla, I fear that I must bring my delightful visit to you to a close."

Mrs. Torrington turned a quick glance upon him at these words, whilst Helen, who was again unravelling some mistakes in Lady Camilla's "poor-work," bent her head more completely over her task.

"Are you certain that you are strong enough to leave us yet, Gilbert?" inquired Lady Camilla kindly.

"Yes; I am perfectly well again now, thanks to your kind care; and I have two engagements in Yorkshire

which I had put off, but which I must now go and fulfil."

Dora rose to go to the piano, making a signal to him to follow her.

"How can you be so unkind as to go away?" she murmured to him reproachfully, whilst he was arranging her music for her upon the desk.

"My dear girl," he began awkwardly, "I really must sometimes go and see some of my friends."

"Where are you going? Can I not get invited to the houses you are to stay in?"

"I am going first to the Delastairs," he said, not without a shade of malice; for Mrs. Delastair was one of those exceedingly particular leaders of society who draw the line at lively widows who make themselves conspicuous by their flirtations. Mrs. Delastair, moreover, had distinctly declined the honor of Mrs. Torrington's acquaintance, and Mrs. Torrington was aware of it.

She made a movement of impatience and annoyance. "That horrid woman! How can you go and stay in her house when you know how rude she has been to me?"

"Delastair has the best pheasant shooting in Yorkshire."

"How like a man that is! I believe you would swallow any insult for the sake of a day's good shooting."

"I hope not. Neither Delastair nor his wife have insulted me; and don't you think, my dear Dora, that it would be somewhat compromising to you if I were to constitute myself the champion of your quarrels?"

"You are selfish and cruel!" she retorted angrily.

"Do sing 'The Falling Leaves,' " selecting a song from the pile of music on the piano. "It suits your voice so well." He opened it, and propped it up against the music desk, ignoring entirely her accusation

Dora was flattered. Gilbert in the old days of his early passion had been fond of her singing, and had often hung entranced by the hour together over her piano; but of late years he had seemed to take very little interest in her vocal performances. Perhaps her voice was less true and sweet than of yore—or perhaps it was because the singer was less attractive to him—that her songs failed to please or soothe him. When he asked her now to sing she was mollified. It was like old times, and surely, surely, it showed that she had not altogether lost her power over him. She shot a swift smile up at his handsome face and began to sing.

But the heart of man is said to be deceitful above all things, and certainly never was its duplicity more clearly instanced than on this occasion.

The piano was a cottage one, and naturally it stood against the wall, so that the singer's back was turned toward the room.

Dora's little piping voice was soon well under way in the somewhat melancholy refrain of the song, which repeated its inanities with an irritating iteration:

The leaves are falling, falling,
And my heart is breaking,
Whilst a voice is calling, calling,
And my soul is waking;
Whilst the leaves are falling, falling, falling.

They were falling incessantly, and whilst the dirge-like ditty spun itself out a little serio-comedy was enacted behind the singer's unconscious back.

Under cover of some heavy bass chords which accompanied the fall of those leaves and the fracture of that depressed heart, Nugent stole softly back across the thick velvet pile carpet to the slender figure seated at the table in the centre of the room. Lady Camilla

noted the retrograde movement from her corner, and with an internal chuckle kept her eyes discreetly fixed upon her newspaper.

"I may as well see nothing," she thought. "Dora would play me false in a minute if it suited her, and if her plan of salvation fails I may as well have another iron in the fire!"

Nugent bent low over the back of Helen's chair. "I must speak to you," he whispered in her ear. She lifted her head with a startled expression, and a wave of color flooded her face. His head was within a few inches of her own—his eyes, passion laden, poured their love and longing into hers—it was impossible to mistake his meaning. Her eyelids fell and she trembled slightly.

"I have to start early to-morrow morning—at eight o'clock. Will you see me before I start?"

"Yes."

"At half-past seven in the library?"

Again her lips framed a voiceless "Yes," and in another second he was back again at the cottage piano murmuring a faint "Brava, brava!" as the last of the falling leaves fell definitely away into the final cadences of Dora Torrington's song.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LOVE tryst at half-past seven o'clock on a cold January morning, in a fireless room, does not hold out to the minds of sane and sober persons any elements of a purely romantic nature; but to the follies of lovers there is no end, and in order to secure the bliss of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* there is no discomfort and no inconvenience on the face of the earth to which they will not cheerfully and eagerly submit.

It was, therefore, with praiseworthy punctuality that at half-past seven o'clock on the following morning Nugent and Helen Dacre found themselves together in the large and empty library.

The fire was as yet unlighted, the grate being still filled with yesterday's ashes; the chairs were pushed out of their places, books and newspapers lay in disorder about the tables—in fact, it was evident that the housemaid had not yet entered the room on her morning rounds.

Nugent, who was the first to appear, himself opened the shutters and threw back the heavy window curtains, so that the pale light of a frosty morning crept cheerlessly and dimly into the room from the glazed veranda without. Helen came in timidly. She was very pale, and seemed nervous and frightened. Gilbert went forward eagerly to meet her.

"How good of you to get up! How can I thank you enough!" he murmured, as he grasped her hand.

"Please be quick," she whispered, looking round ner-

vously. "I am afraid some one may find us here—the servants."

"Never mind the servants. If they come in it can't be helped. Helen, don't you know—cannot you guess—what I have to say to you?"

Her color rose, and her head dropped. He took the sweet, shy face between both his hands and lifted it up.

"Darling, I love you!" he whispered. "I love you with all my soul. I want you for my own when I have freed myself—when I have shaken off this intolerable yoke that is my shame and disgrace. Will you forgive me, my unworthy past, and be my wife?"

He drew her close to his heart, so that her head lay against his breast. She made neither answer nor resistance—but the gentle pressure of her yielding form, as she leant upon him, told him without any need of words that her heart was his own.

"I wanted to tell you this before I went away," he continued—"to explain to you how impossible it is for me to continue in this house and in the false position I hold here any longer. I have accepted this invitation to-day solely that I may not remain here any longer. I could not, unfortunately, go to Yorkshire until the day after to-morrow. I must return here to-morrow night; but I shall only be here for that one night, and leave again on the following morning. It is very unlikely that I can have a word with you; but when I am in Yorkshire I am going to write to her and put an end to this horrible slavery. It will be easier for me to write than to speak—and then after a few weeks, dearest, I will go to London and lay my case before your guardian and plead for the dear hand that I covet for my own. Meanwhile, will you trust in me?"

He bent and kissed her forehead gently and reverently with infinite worship and tenderness.

"You are so good and so true," he whispered, "so immeasurably too good for such a man as I am."

"Oh, don't say that," she found voice to answer, "You don't know—indeed—indeed—I am not too good."

"Ah! you must allow me to be the judge of that," he said, with a smile. "I have not a shadow of doubt of you. You are truth itself; you could not be false or deceitful; those beautiful eyes of yours never looked an untrue look; and these sweet lips are incapable of uttering a lie."

She trembled and shrank in his arms—a deathly pal-
lor chased her blushes away—she hid her face from his gaze upon his arm. Why, oh, why, did he strike her to the heart with those terrible words of praise?

The lie that she had spoken to him stood out in letters of flame before her. For one wild moment she strove to find her voice to speak, to confess the truth to him, to tell him that she had deceived him. If he had only seen her agitation, and questioned her. But he saw nothing, and her voice failed, and her parched lips refused to utter the words which should debase her forever in his eyes.

And then swiftly she told herself with that sophistry with which we all make excuses for our mean and bad actions, that, after all, the lie was a lie no longer; that she had made amends for it, and that by this very morning's post she expected the letter which was to set her free from the hateful error of her past. What need was there, then, that she should confess to him that closed chapter of her girlish mistake?

She could tell him nothing. Only as in a dream she heard him repeat over and over again his unbounded

belief in her, and his faith in the saving influence which was to renovate and purify his whole life. She heard him call her his guardian angel, sweet saint of the blameless heart—his true love who was to crown his life with joy and gladness.

Once or twice she tried feebly and vainly to stem the flow of these undeserved encomiums; but her faint denials only seemed to him to be the outcome of her modesty and humility, and he scarcely listened to them, or heard the low and trembling words.

After all, too, the time was very short. A bell in the hall rang for his early breakfast, warning him that he had not another moment to spare; and a footstep along the passage outside caused Helen to start away guiltily from his arms, and to fly like a frightened deer through the window and out along the veranda to the morning-room beyond.

They had not been more than ten minutes together. How would it have been possible to compress into so short a space the story of her folly and her weakness, and of the miserable cowardice which had driven her into telling him a lie.

After he had gone she tried to console herself with these reflections, and she told herself positively that it was absolutely impossible that she could have done it.

“I will tell him afterward” she said to herself; “some day when his love has strengthened, and he has learned to understand me better. I will tell him when he is my husband.”

The first little shock that happened to her after he was gone was that there was no letter from Frederick Warne.

Nothing at all came by post for her. It gave her a vague sense of uneasiness that he had not written. Surely her letter was of a kind which required an

answer by return. She had expected her release, and her own few letters to be returned to her—instead of which there was nothing!

What added still more to the feeling of impending trouble which began to oppress her was the fact that she could not help perceiving, lying uppermost on Lady Camilla's little pile of letters, a bluish envelope on which were traced the once well-known fine copperplate characters of old Miss Fairbrother's handwriting.

When Lady Camilla came down and took her place behind the teacups, she shuffled all her letters together so that that especial one no longer was visible, and then she proceeded to wish Helen and Mrs. Torrington "Good morning," and to pour out their tea.

Of course, Helen argued to herself, there was no earthly reason why Miss Fairbrother should not write to her old pupil—probably she often did so. Neither had she the faintest reason to connect her letter with her own anxiety at getting no answer from the old lady's nephew.

Nevertheless, she could not shake off the impression that in some way or other the two incidents were connected with each other and with her.

After breakfast Mr. Greyson started off in the dogcart to the country town, and Lady Camilla asked Dora to come into her boudoir, and the two ladies vanished upstairs together.

Helen hung about the hall doing nothing.

There was no hunting to-day. The glass was rising, and there was every indication that the slight frost of the early morning meant increasing and lasting. The book-box had gone back to Mudie's and was not expected to return till the next day. There was nothing to read but the newspapers; and at twenty the leading

articles in the *Times* do not hold out a very tempting prospect to a woman's soul.

She found a stray number of an old magazine, and sat down listlessly before the wide fireplace with it in her hand. The tall clock ticked solemnly and soberly behind her; Ted's old liver-colored spaniel snored comfortably on the hearth-rug; every now and then a distant door upstairs shut or closed, and nothing else happened at all for the space of a whole hour.

Helen was only pretending to read. Her eyes strayed frequently into the fire, and her thoughts were busy recalling every word and look of her lover's in that short interview of the early morning.

She was very happy, of course—what woman is not as she remembers the fond words and fonder caresses in which the man she cares for has told her of his love? And yet she was all the time desperately uncomfortable.

She wished she had never told him an untruth; she wished she had found courage to confess her faults to him; and she wished more than all else that Frederick had written to her.

But as all these were vain wishes they did not at all succeed in dispelling any of her uneasiness of mind.

All at once Dora Torrington came running downstairs from the boudoir overhead.

"I've got such a brilliant idea, Helen!" she cried out to her excitedly. "We have nothing on earth to do to-day, have we?"

"Nothing."

"It's horribly dull; not a man in the house; even old Tom away; and I've got a lovely idea."

"What is it?"

"Well, I want to run up to town to choose a new dinner dress. I wanted Camilla to go with me, but she

says she feels a cold in her head coming on, and had rather not. Will you come with me, Helen?"

"I?" Helen said, with surprise; "but is there time now?"

"Lots. I don't mean to come back till to-morrow morning; we can stop at the Midland Hotel. I'll telegraph for rooms, and we can go and see some play. There is that new thing at the Haymarket. We will telegraph for stalls and go and see it. Do say 'yes,' Helen—it will be quite a little jaunt for us."

"I should of course have to take my maid," said Helen a little dubiously. This "new departure" puzzled her. Mrs. Torrington was not often so genial and so bent upon securing her society.

"Oh, certainly, if you don't mind the expense of it. Of course I am a pauper to have to think about the shillings."

"Will you let me have the pleasure of being your hostess, Mrs. Torrington, for our little trip?" said Helen, with a sudden flush. "The hotel bill and the stalls shall be my affair. I never know how to spend all the money I have got."

"You are very kind, my dear. Well—since you wish it—and as you say you have plenty of money—I certainly have none. Well, it's settled, then, and we will go by the three o'clock train. I must run and send off the telegrams. It is very good of you, Helen—you really are a dear girl!" and she gave her a kiss. It was a Judas-kiss, if Helen had only known it. "And you must not call me Mrs. Torrington. You must call me Dora."

Helen assented with a faint smile as she submitted to the kiss, and the little widow ran away to write and send off the telegrams.

Helen went slowly upstairs to give the necessary orders to her maid. She was thoughtful. She could not quite understand the meaning of this sudden resolution.

“Perhaps, after all,” she thought, “she has no meaning save the very simple one of wanting to enjoy herself and go to a theatre. And, after all, if I can give her pleasure by going with her, why should I not? Poor woman; I have taken away her lover from her. If she only knew how bitterly remorseful I feel about that! It makes me glad enough to do any little thing to please her!”

By the afternoon the two ladies, accompanied by Helen’s French maid Celestine, were on their way to London.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE letter which Lady Camilla had received from her old governess seemed to play most delightfully and unexpectedly into the hands of the two conspirators. Miss Fairbrother had written to ask if Lady Camilla would kindly grant an interview to her dear nephew—her poor sister Jane's son—if he presented himself at the door on the following morning.

“The poor fellow,” wrote the old lady, “is very unhappy about Helen Dacre, to whom he is sincerely attached, and who promised long ago to become his wife; but he sadly fears that in her change of fortune and life of pleasure her heart has become of late somewhat estranged to him, and he hopes to enlist your sympathy, my dearest Lady Camilla, in his case, which is, indeed, for a lover, a very sad one.” There was more of it—pages more—but the upshot of it all was the same thing: that Frederick Warne was coming to the house the next day, and that he desired to see Lady Camilla alone when he did come.

“If only we could get her out of the way to-morrow!” Lady Camilla had exclaimed, after they had talked the situation over together for some time.

“What on earth is there to prevent it? I will take her up to London,” cried Dora.

“To London, Dora! Good gracious! On what pretext?”

“Oh, anything will do—my dressmaker—the natural desire of a ‘lark,’ common to all women. I’ll ask her

to go up with me—we will go to a play—stay at an hotel—flatten our noses at the shop windows in Bond Street to-morrow morning—enjoy ourselves vastly, and return by the afternoon train in time for dinner.”

“Dora, you are a perfect genius!” exclaimed her ally, with admiration.

And the wily widow actually managed to make her victim offer to defray the expenses of the expedition proves indubitably what a genius she most decidedly was!

Meanwhile Lady Camilla, who was no fool either, was left at Old Park to perform her part of the affair in their absence. Her tactics were rendered all the easier because her worthy husband had announced to her his intention, if the frost lasted, of starting off by the night train to Rugby in order to attend a sale of valuable hunters, out of which he hoped to add one or two well known animals to his stud. The frost did last, and Mr. Greyson went away. Lady Camilla therefore had Old Park all to herself.

The answer which she sent to Miss Fairbrother, and which contained a gracious and hospitable message to that forlorn and down-hearted lover, her nephew, was soon, like everybody else, on its way to London.

The anonymous letter—to which naturally no allusion was made by either lady—had certainly borne ample fruit already. Lady Camilla spent a whole evening, not at all unhappily, by herself. In her oldest and most comfortable tea gown, with easy slippers on her feet and her spectacles on her nose, she sat in her favorite arm-chair in the cosy chimney corner, and buried herself in her novel. It was a very interesting novel, full of stirring situations and of pathetic episodes. There was no end to the misfortunes which the unhappy and

beautiful heroine of the tale was made to undergo; and presently Lady Camilla's handkerchief came out of her pocket and she wept copiously and heart-brokenly over the sorrows of the unlucky damsel of fiction. When she finished the book and got up to go to her bedroom, she surveyed her flushed face, with her swollen eyes and red nose, in the glass with a critical interest.

"Dear me! I am glad I have been alone to finish that delightful book!" she said aloud to herself; "it has made me cry so dreadfully I really am quite an object. It is a mercy there is nobody here to see me. I can't think," she continued, as she put out the lamp and went slowly up the staircase to her bedroom, "what makes me always cry so much when I read a touching story. I suppose it is because I am so tender-hearted. I never can bear to think of a sweet girl being oppressed, and bullied, and parted from the man she loves, like that poor Euphrosine!" Euphrosine being the name of the heroine over whose woes she had been weeping.

And then she sighed and smiled together as she reflected that she really had a very warm and loving nature, and that it was exceedingly to her credit that she was able to display so much sympathy with virtue in distress.

But though Lady Camilla said her prayers that night as all good Christian women should do, and got into her warm bed with a serene and tranquil conscience, it never occurred to her in the very least that she had no womanly compassion at all for the unlucky girl whom chance had temporarily consigned to her care, and whom she was even now plotting against without any remorse or compunction. If anybody had accused her of such a thing it is certain that she would have had no

tears to shed for Helen Dacre's difficulties, and she would probably have been exceedingly surprised that the natural instincts of self-protection implanted in the breast of a mother should be so cruelly misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The morning dawned; and Lady Camilla, installing herself after breakfast in her cosy boudoir, issued orders that she was at home only to a gentleman whom she expected on business.

In due time a fly, of that rickety and shabby description which the one vehicle appertaining to a country wayside station usually presents, came crawling slowly up the long avenue—she could watch its approach from the window of her room—and drew up before the door of the house.

A few minutes later Mr. Frederick Warne was ushered into her boudoir.

Well, Lady Camilla was certainly taken somewhat aback by his appearance. He was so shabby, so ungainly and unkempt, so utterly different to the young men of the world in which her life had been spent, that a swift pang of compunction did shoot through her heart at the thought that it was to this underbred and unattractive person that she was prepared to hand over her brother's charming ward, with her sensitive face and her little air of refinement and distinction.

"It is most unchristian of me to feel it," she said to herself, with a virtuous reaction a moment after. "For no doubt he is an excellent man, and will make her an admirable husband. But what boots! And what clothes! And I wonder if he ever puts on a clean shirt!"

She welcomed her guest, however, with much cordiality, requested him to be seated, and mentioned the name of her dear governess, his aunt, as an intro-

duction. She thought she would set him at his ease, but she little knew Frederick Warne. He was quite as much at his ease in the luxurious boudoir of this great lady, with its pictures and china, and rich draperies—with the scent of the hot-house flowers and all the subtle influences that surround a delicately nurtured woman—as if he had been in his old aunt's bare little study, or facing his girl-students' admiring glances as they sat in rows on their hard wooden school-benches.

Nothing abashed Mr. Warne—he had far too good an opinion of himself. He was not at all the forlorn and desponding lover which Miss Fairbrother had intimated him to be. He was a man who had come to claim his rights and to proclaim them loudly, to begin with.

So, as soon as he had replied to Lady Camilla's inquiries after his aunt's rheumatism, he dashed boldly into the matter which was in his mind.

“I understand, Lady Camilla, that Miss Dacre is at present an inmate of your house?”

“At this very moment she is away, Mr. Warne. She has gone to town with my cousin; but I expect them back to-night.”

“She is under your charge, at all events?”

“Certainly. My brother, Lord Bainton, is, as perhaps you know, her guardian, and for the present he has entrusted her to me.”

“Your brother, Lady Camilla, is scheming to rob me of Miss Dacre's affections,” continued Warne, with a sort of menacing “deny-it-if-you-dare” air.

Lady Camilla colored and drew herself up with offence. This plain speaking upon such a very delicate subject was not at all to her liking.

“Sir! I do not understand your meaning,” she said, very coldly, and with that glance of haughty displeas-

ure before which her inferiors had often been known to tremble. Mr. Warne did not tremble at all. He looked at her fixedly through his spectacles, and went on with his argument.

“Then I will proceed to make my meaning clear to your ladyship. I was engaged to be married to Miss Dacre while she was a pupil-teacher in my aunt’s school. She accepted me two years ago of her own free will. She was poor, she was homeless, but it suited me to ask her to become my wife, and she promised to do so. At that time Lord Bainton, who was as much her guardian then as he is now, took no notice of her whatever. He did not care, in fact, whether she was alive or dead. Now, mark what happens: Somebody leaves a large fortune to Miss Dacre. Immediately the Earl of Bainton wakes up and remembers his duties to his ward; he appears on the scene, tempts her away from the safe home where her girlhood has been spent; carries her away with him in spite of my protests—in spite, too, of my claims with which I acquainted him instantly, and which he affected to treat as of no consequence at all. What am I to suppose, Lady Camilla, save that Lord Bainton is determined to rob me of my bride?”

“You have a grievance, Mr. Warne. You certainly have a grievance; but you must remember that my brother has certain duties toward Miss Dacre.”

“Duties which he omitted entirely until she had become an heiress,” interrupted the injured schoolmaster somewhat rudely.

Lady Camilla bit her lip. She had some difficulty in keeping her temper. She intended to use this man as her tool—but what a rough and dirty tool he was, to be sure!

"Let us talk this matter calmly and dispassionately over, Mr. Warne," she said, after a pause.

"Certainly, certainly. I want to talk it over. I want to know whether you will help me to gain possession of what is my own, or whether you are going to help Lord Bainton in his scheme of spoliation?"

"Mr. Warne, I think you are making use of the most unwarrantable expressions. I can do nothing for you if you forget the respect due to myself and to the Earl of Bainton."

"Madam—my lady, I should say—I am not afraid of any man because he is a lord. Thank heaven, my political views have taught me that the aristocracy are a depraved and degenerate race."

"Sir, what have your political views on the aristocracy got to do with your love affairs?" cried Lady Camilla, with real and irrepressible anger.

Mr. Warne saw that he had better change his tactics.

"I stand rebuked—your ladyship is right—and I will not allude to this subject again. What I want is Helen Dacre—I have a right to her."

"You have, undoubtedly, Mr. Warne. I am willing to allow your right; but I must disabuse your mind at once of the strange idea which seems to possess you. Miss Dacre has a little money, certainly; but Lord Bainton is rich, and does not want money—and, moreover, Miss Dacre would be totally unfitted to become his wife. She does not belong to the Earl of Bainton's station in life, and a man of his ancient name does not marry beneath him." This she added proudly and haughtily, little as she knew it to be true.

"Yet I have seen a letter—a mysterious and incomprehensible letter—which contained a distinct warning

that Miss Dacre would soon, if I did not stand up for my rights, be stolen from me."

"I know nothing about your mysterious letters, Mr. Warne," said Lady Camilla hastily; "they have nothing to do with me. I may, however, suggest that Miss Dacre is not ill-looking, and she is rich. There may be *other* fortune-hunters in the field."

She looked at him with meaning. But Frederick Warne was quite unconscious of the implication. He did not consider himself a fortune-hunter at all—only a deserving and superior person who had just claims to what he sought.

"Others? Then, indeed, I have been wise to come here. Poor Helen has no stability of character. I have long feared that vanity and love of pleasure would turn her head. Your ladyship must surely agree with me that to become the wife of a man of sobriety and of learning—who is able to guide and direct her—to control the natural frivolity of her disposition, and to strengthen and improve her mental faculties, is quite the best and happiest fate that can befall her."

"I agree with you, Mr. Warne. It will be quite the best thing for her—and for us all!" she added mentally.

"You are prepared to help me, then?"

"Certainly; but what can I do? My brother——"

"Your brother is not at present in charge of Miss Dacre. If you are on my side, much can be done in his absence." Lady Camilla was quite aware of this—in point of fact, it was the basis of her own operations.

"If you will give me my chance," continued Warne, "I shall be able, I think, to persuade Miss Dacre to return to the path of duty. I have a letter of hers—two in fact—written some time ago, which completely prove my claim upon her. Produced in a court of justice,

they would certainly establish my right to large and substantial damages."

"You would threaten her, in fact, with an action for breach of promise?" inquired Lady Camilla, with lifted eyebrows. Truly this young man was a valuable ally!

"That is my intention," assented the schoolmaster blandly.

"Well, I will give you your 'chance,' as you call it, Mr. Warne. I do not suppose that either Miss Dacre or Lord Bainton will care to risk a public scandal, so perhaps you will be able to win your cause; but what do you wish me to do in the matter? Now can I be of any service to you?"

"Very simply. If your ladyship will kindly ring the bell and desire your servants to prepare a room for me, they can, at the same time, pay and send away the fly and take my Gladstone bag out of it—"

"Your bag!" gasped Lady Camilla; "you brought your bag?"

"Certainly I did. I felt sure you would invite me to remain the night here."

"Mr. Warne, you are a veritable Machiavelli!" said Lady Camilla. She rang the bell and gave the necessary orders; and Mr. Frederick Warne became a fixture.

"Good Lord, what a cad!" exclaimed Lady Camilla, when her unwelcome visitor had at length removed himself out of her boudoir. "What an insolent, impudent, outrageous cad! But he is a genius, for all that, and if he rids us of Helen Dacre, it's cheaply bought at the price. I thank heaven my Tom isn't coming back till to-morrow. What on earth would he have said if he had come back and found such a dreadful creature in the house?"

CHAPTER XX.

"I HAVE a delightful surprise for you, Helen!" were almost Lady Camilla's first words to the girl on her return from London.

A few whispered words had been exchanged between her ladyship and Mrs. Torrington, and then the latter had run upstairs, for the train had been late, and it was time to dress for dinner; but Helen was unfastening her wraps in the hall, and Lady Camilla kept her back for one minute to say this to her.

The girl looked animated and happy. The little trip had done her good. She had enjoyed the shops and the gay streets, and, above all, the excellent play at the Haymarket theatre, which had been a real delight to her; and besides all this deep down in her heart the consciousness of Nugent's love—the remembrance of his words to her—and the knowledge that in a few hours she would see his face again kept up a perpetual chorus of secret strains of joy within her.

Now, with the fatuity of all those who love, when Lady Camilla smiled and kissed her and spoke of a "surprise" for her, her glad thoughts flew at once to the man she loved, and she said to herself, "He is here! He has come back sooner than he intended—and he has told everything to Lady Camilla!"

The color rushed in a guilty flame to her cheeks, as she answered, consciously—

"A surprise, Lady Camilla! What can it be?"

Her hostess tapped her cheeks playfully. "Ah, I am not going to tell you! You shall see when dinner time comes. Oh, you sly puss, to hide your secret so cleverly from me! But I have found it all out now."

Naturally Helen blushed more guiltily than ever.

"Oh, Lady Camilla! And you are not angry about it, then?"

"Angry, my dearest girl? Why, I am enchanted! I do so delight in a story of true love, especially when it is love under difficulties—there, there!" kissing her again, fondly and clingingly. "Run upstairs and dress, my love, and put on your prettiest and most becoming dress; for who can tell who you may not find here when you come downstairs again?"

Helen obeyed her to the letter. There was a pale blue dress of hers, of soft and shimmery texture, which Gilbert's eyes had once rested upon with admiration, and in which he had told her one evening in a passing whisper that she looked "sweet."

It was this dress which she now took out of her wardrobe and desired her maid to dress her in.

A row of pearls round her white neck, a tiny diamond fly—her guardian's Christmas present—in her dark hair, and the effect was complete. The soft blue draperies set off her graceful figure to perfection, and there was a glow of excitement upon her face and a light of happiness in her large dark eyes, which gave the lustre of genuine beauty to her whole aspect.

"You look *charmante, mademoiselle*," said her maid, as her young mistress surveyed herself in the long glass before leaving the room; and Helen smiled and felt glad to think that the girl's words were no flattery, and that for to-night, at least, it was true.

"I look my best, I do think," she said to herself.

“And he will see me. If only his eyes look approval I want no other praise!”

She came downstairs into the hall, where it was the custom to assemble before dinner. She was the first; she had made good speed with her toilette, in the hopes that Gilbert, too, might be early, and that an opportunity for a few words with him might be hers. But he did not appear; and presently Lady Camilla's voice became audible upon the wide landing above. She was talking to somebody. Helen could hear what she was saying.

“Yes; our travellers have come back. The train was late—our trains on this branch line are terribly unpunctual. They had a cold journey, they tell me; but Helen, for one, is none the worse for it. Ah! here she is herself.”

Helen looked up. Lady Camilla's portly figure in her brocaded green satin gown was coming down the staircase, filling up the foreground with its ample proportions; and behind her, in the gloom, she could see a man in evening dress. Her heart stood still—it was not Nugent! Who then was it?

The soft radiance of the rose-shaded lamps below first illumined Lady Camilla and then her companion, as they descended one after the other.

Helen fell back; her hand grasped the back of a chair to steady herself. She asked herself for one wild moment if she were awake, or if this was some horrible nightmare. In the next instant Lady Camilla's laughing voice was saying to her—

“Here, my dear child, is an unexpected pleasure for you! Mr. Warne has come to pay us a little visit! I told you I had a surprise for you! Is she not looking well, Mr. Warne?”

And Helen found herself shaking hands mechanically

with the man whom she believed she had rid herself of forever.

Mrs. Torrington came running downstairs. The butler threw open the dining-room door, and announced dinner. Lady Camilla passed her arm in a friendly fashion through that of her guest.

"Come along, Mr. Warne!" she cried. "I am sorry that it is your fate to take an old woman like me in to dinner. My dears, we have no other gentleman to-night, so you must take care of one another."

Helen and Dora Torrington stood for a moment facing each other.

"Did you know of this?" asked Helen breathlessly, with that straight, level look of hers which Dora always said "gave her the creeps."

"Of this? Of what? Of the advent upon the scene of your admirer? My dear, how could I possibly know of it? Have I not been in London with you?"

"Why is he here? Why has Lady Camilla invited him to stay in the house?" cried Helen passionately.

"My dear child, how can I tell? Come, don't be tragical! he must go in to dinner; the soup will get cold, and I am ravenously hungry!" She passed her arm through Helen's, and drew her toward the dining-room door. "After all there is nothing to be upset about. The poor man evidently adores you. I thought so, you know, when he called here once before and spoke to me. It is always flattering to a woman to be worshipped, and this is an old-standing attachment evidently."

"I must speak to that man alone directly after dinner," said Helen quickly—almost feverishly. "It is absolutely necessary that I should do so. Dora, will you help me?"

"Certainly, my dear. No doubt the poor man him-

self will be only too charmed to have a private interview with you!"

They had reached the dining-room; there was nothing more to be said. Helen sat down in gloomy silence. A wild rage was in her heart, and reflected itself visibly upon her angry face. How dare he—she said to herself—how dare he come here and persecute her with his presence and force himself as a guest into the house after she had told him that she would not marry him, and that her engagement with him must come to an end!

And then her heart stood still with another fear. Gilbert Nugent would be back to-night! At what hour would he arrive? When would he come?

With all her heart she trusted that he would be very late. He was to stay to dinner with his friends; it was, therefore, hardly possible that he could be at Old Park before eleven o'clock. It was a good ten-mile drive, and the night was dark.

By that time she would have spoken her mind to this detestable lover of her youth, and have shut herself up in her own room. She would not be able to see Nugent to-night now; and Frederick, in common decency, might be expected to leave the house by the earliest train in the morning.

All might yet be saved!

She did not yet know that these two women, who were smiling, and talking and amusing themselves by drawing poor Frederick Warne out only to laugh at him secretly for his pomposity and his self-conceit, held in reality the keys of the situation between them, and had determined upon her ruin.

The dinner, which was to her a perfect purgatory, came to an end at length, and Lady Camilla, requesting

Frederick to stay and smoke if he liked, rose from the table.

"I never smoke!" He said it with a virtuous frigidity.

"Oh, very well, then—come into the drawing-room with us; though I always think a man should find some inducement to keep out of the drawing-room for half an hour after dinner. Will you go into the billiard-room, or will you drink some more claret?"

"I neither play billiards nor drink, Lady Camilla," said Warne sternly. "What I wish to do is to speak privately to Miss Dacre."

"Oh! by all means."

"And I, Lady Camilla, wish to speak to Mr. Warne," said Helen, with a heightened color.

"Far be it from me to part two such fond lovers for an instant longer!" exclaimed Lady Camilla, with a smile whilst Dora laughed—that cruel mocking little laugh of hers.

"Go into the library, you poor turtle doves!" she cried, pushing them both along the passage playfully. "There are lights, and a fire, and all sorts of comfortable armchairs there. You will be able to enjoy yourselves thoroughly."

"Dora, how can you?" cried Helen indignantly.

"Mrs. Torrington scarcely apprehends the gravity of the situation," said Warne coldly; "and to apply the expression 'turtle dove' to a person in my position in the world is scarcely—scarcely—"

"Scarcely proper! I dare say you mean," laughed Dora. "Oh, dear me, Mr. Warne, you really will be the death of me! You are too, too, utterly funny!"

But as nobody else seemed to see the fun of it, Dora had the laugh all to herself.

Poor Helen would rather have gone through her

interview anywhere but in the library. That room was sacred to her from a *tête-à-tête* of a totally different character. But as apparently everything had been prepared for her there (it only occurred to her long afterward to wonder why), she acquiesced meekly in the arrangement.

Lady Camilla and her cousin went into the drawing-room together, whilst, with a horrible feeling of dread and repulsion, she led the way into the library—Frederick following her jauntily, as a man does when he feels he has got his enemy under his thumb.

Dora Torrington could settle to nothing. She could not sit still for one single minute. Her excitement was intense. She went from the clock on the mantelpiece backward and forward to the windows a dozen times.

“Oh! I wish he would come! I wish he would come!” she kept on saying.

“My dear, do keep still—you fidget me dreadfully. I tell you Gilbert must be here almost immediately.”

She drew a letter she had received from Nugent that morning out of her pocket, and referred to it. “He says he will not wait for dinner there; but will ask for a sandwich when he gets back from shooting and start off at once, as he wants to get back here quickly. ‘I shall be with you by nine,’ he says.”

“It is five minutes past nine now!”

“Well, and here he is!” cried Lady Camilla; “for I hear the sound of wheels coming up the avenue!”

Dora flew out into the hall. Gilbert Nugent came in out of the darkness wrapped in a heavy fur coat. He saw Dora’s light figure running forward toward him across the fire-lit hall, and Lady Camilla’s face framed in the doorway of the drawing-room beyond. He threw

a rapid glance round as he entered—but no one else was there.

“Come in and get warm,” cried Dora to him gayly. “Have you had a good shoot? Have you enjoyed yourself? Come in, come in; we have such lots to tell you!”

He laid aside his coat and went into the drawing-room.

Again he looked eagerly round, but Helen Dacre was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XXI.

"BUT I don't understand, Dora!"

"Never mind. You are not required to understand; I only want you to come with me, as I tell you."

Nugent looked puzzled, and a little bit uneasy. He was standing upon the hearthrug before the drawing-room fire—he had not yet sat down.

Dora stood dragging at him by the hands. Lady Camilla was laughing a little to herself.

"Don't ask questions; just come with me. I have something to show you."

"What is it? Why can't you let me alone? I am cold. Do let me wait and warm myself. What silly joke have you got in your head now, Dora?" And then again he looked round the room. Where on earth was Helen? Why did she not come? She must know he had come back.

"Where is Miss Dacre?" he asked suddenly. "She is not ill, I hope?"

"Oh! dear no; she is all right. I don't know where she is—but do come, Gilbert."

"I can't think why you cannot leave a fellow in peace when he is cold and tired," he grumbled. Her childish eagerness amazed him. He was thinking about Helen. He had hurried home with as much haste as he could, in the hopes of getting a few words with her, and now she was nowhere to be seen!

"What on earth do you want me to do?" he asked impatiently.

"Only just to come with me. There is really something most amusing that I want you to see; you will laugh so much."

Nugent felt no inclination for laughter. The broadest farce, the most extravagant comic situation, could scarcely, at that moment, have drawn a smile from him; he was far too anxious, too much in earnest, and too much in love.

However, for peace sake, he saw that he had better give in to Mrs. Torrington's request; and very unwillingly, and somewhat ill-humoredly, he allowed himself to be led out of the room. As he went through the door he heard again Lady Camilla's little laugh, in which there was a tone of triumph as well as of amusement.

Now it must be explained that along one side of Old Park house—the side into which opened the morning-room and also the library windows—there ran a long, covered veranda, glazed in at the sides and comfortably roofed over above. This veranda was in winter time heated with hot air, and being thickly carpeted and furnished with comfortable couches and chairs, besides being decorated along the outer side with plants, was a somewhat favorite resort, in bad weather, of the occupants of the house. One window of the morning-room—a window that was in fact a door—opened into it, and two of the French windows at the side of the library.

When Dora got outside the drawing-room, she seized Gilbert's long red neck-scarf from the hall table, where he had thrown it aside on entering, and playfully insisted on blindfolding him. Little as he was in the mood for such a foolish pleasantry, Nugent reflected that "in for a penny, in for a pound," and that he might

as well not waste more time in objections, but submit with the best grace that he could to her caprices.

Dora therefore bound the scarf tightly over his eyes, and led him away captive.

She took him into the morning-room and out into the veranda, until she reached the first of the windows that looked into the library. It was quite dark in the veranda—so that to persons within the room any one outside would be quite invisible. Drawing forward a chair she pushed him down into it.

“Now,” she said, “you are to count fifty, and then you are to take off your bandage, and you shall see—what you shall see!”

“What infernal nonsense this is!” he muttered; but still he obeyed her because he fancied that it was some game—some *tableaux vivants*, perhaps; some feminine entertainment which the three ladies, left all day to their own devices, had amused themselves by organizing for his benefit.

Dora crept away on tiptoe. He heard the soft rustle of her receding skirts. Then a moment of silence. Next a clicking sound, curiously like the turning of a key in a door; then, oddly enough, the murmuring sound of voices in front of him—two voices, a man’s and a woman’s—which answered one another.

With a horrible premonition of evil he tore the scarf suddenly from his eyes. The window before which he sat was ajar, Dora had put it so purposely before she had gone in to dinner. The curtains were drawn back. He could both see and hear the occupants of the library. With a smothered exclamation he stepped away from the window, and went hurriedly back to the door of the morning-room. It was locked from the other side, and Dora Torrington had vanished!

Save through the library there was no way of escape from the trap into which she had led him.

Drawn back by an irresistible force, he retraced his steps and stood before the library window. He saw Helen—Helen, who only two mornings ago in that self-same room had leant against his heart, and had listened yielding and consenting to his confession of love!—Helen, who now stood there alone with another man—a perfect stranger to him! He could not see her face, because her back was turned to the windows; but the expression of the man's face, despite its vulgarity and ungainliness, was quite unmistakable—it was the face of a man who speaks to the woman he covets for his own.

Honor no doubt should have bid Gilbert Nugent throw wide open the half-closed windows and disclose at once to the couple within that they were no longer alone; but there is something in a man's breast which, when it is once thoroughly aroused, is stronger even than his honor, and that something is jealousy.

It is perhaps one of the most hideous of all human passions, and, at the same time, it is one of the strongest. A man who is jealous is no longer master of himself. He loses his self-control, and does and says things which would be impossible to him in his saner mood.

For the moment, then, this demon of jealousy took possession of Gilbert Nugent.

She was false, then—this girl upon whose truth and faith he would have staked his existence!

What other interpretation could be put upon her presence here—alone in the evening with this man—in a room away from the others? Or was there not by some wonderful chance some other meaning to that which his eyes and his senses revealed to him? What had this

man to do with her? Who was he? Ah! at all costs he must know! The truth, at any price!

He pushed the window yet a little more widely open, and Helen's words as he did so sounded clearly in his ears—

"You had no right to come here—no right to persecute me!"

Then, at any rate, she did not love him! Perhaps, then, all was well—he was only some unwelcome suitor pressing his unwished-for attentions upon her.

But the man's words in answer sent this theory tumbling to pieces.

"I have every right," said Frederick Warne stoutly, "and I intend to force my right. I have your written words—letters which you yourself have sent me."

"Ah! for pity's sake give me back those letters!"

"Certainly not! They are my property. I value them. They are precious to me. They contain promises which I do not intend to allow you to break with impunity."

"You are capable, then, of threatening me?"

"I am capable of everything, Helen, in order to make you return to your duty. Your head has been turned by wealth and prosperity."

"No, no! you do not understand me."

"Do not interrupt me," said the schoolmaster, in his most dictatorial manner. "Your moral nature has become sadly debased since you have cast in your lot with frivolous worldlings, with sycophants who only flatter you for your money. You have forgotten those who cared for you, and who sheltered you from evil when you were poor and friendless. You are ungrateful to those friends of the past."

"Indeed, indeed, I am not ungrateful. I can never

forget your aunt's kindness to me—nor yours; but—but——”

“There can be no ‘but’ in the matter. You are bound to me. You promised me years ago to become my wife. You are engaged to me—you cannot, you shall not, break that engagement, which you entered into of your own free will.”

The window crashed open behind them. Gilbert Nugent strode across the room.

“It is a lie! he cried loudly and roughly; “a base, cowardly lie!”

Helen shrank back with a faint cry. Nugent's face was distorted with passion. He stood between them both like an avenging Nemesis, looking angrily from one to the other. “It is a lie!” he repeated once more, as though he could not say it often enough.

Frederick Warne settled his spectacles upon his nose, and gazed with mild curiosity at the intruder.

“Ahem! I do not quite know who you are, sir, nor why you interrupt me in this violent manner—and with such—a—immoderate expressions. But if you will kindly explain your intrusion, I will give you a reasonable hearing.”

“And I do not know by what right you are here, alone with this lady, sir!” retorted Nugent furiously; “nor why you make assertions concerning her that have no foundation in truth. Miss Dacre is engaged to be married to me. She can have nothing whatever to do with you. Desist, therefore, from your unwelcome attentions and leave the room at once.”

Frederick Warne smiled with tranquil superiority. “You are laboring under a delusion, my dear sir. Miss Dacre has been engaged to me for nearly three years; she cannot possibly be engaged to you.”

"I do not believe it."

"I am sorry," and Frederick Warne shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "How can I convince you? Here are Miss Dacre's letters." He produced a packet from his pocket and held it out for inspection.

Gilbert's eyes fell upon the handwriting. It was undoubtedly Helen's. He pushed the man's hand roughly away.

"Oh, if you still doubt me, I will not read them. Ask Miss Dacre herself. She will scarcely to my face be able to deny her relations to me."

Nugent turned toward her. The white face, the trembling form, the averted eyes, all struck a cold chill of horrible conviction to his heart.

"Helen," he said, controlling himself with difficulty, and speaking in a low and calmer voice, "will you not deny this man's statements, and tell him that they are false?"

"I cannot," she murmured almost inaudibly.

"They—they are true, then?"

"They are true." Her voice was almost extinct.

There was a moment of profound silence.

Then Nugent turned and said in a perfectly quiet and polite manner—

"I must apologize very sincerely, Mr. —Mr. ——?"

"Warne, sir—Warne."

"Thanks, Mr. Warne. For my intrusion, and for the violence of my language to you, I must beg that you will pardon me. Will you, however, reward evil with good by permitting me to say three words in private to this lady, ere I wish her farewell, and remove myself out of her way forever? I shall esteem it as a great favor if you will grant me this trifling request?"

"Certainly, sir; certainly. I cannot refuse so reason-

able a demand; and as I am a guest in Lady Camilla's house till to-morrow, I shall no doubt have the opportunity of finishing my conversation with Miss Dacre in the morning, when I trust she will be in a more reasonable frame of mind."

He bowed and left the room.

Gilbert and Helen were left alone. She sank down upon a sofa, her face buried in her arms.

It did not occur to her to excuse or to justify herself.

She knew his high standard of truth, and she knew that she had fallen from it. There was nothing more to be said.

"Then," he said, at length, after a silence that seemed to her to be interminable, "then—you lied to me?"

A long, low sob was her only reply.

"And I, who believed in you! who trusted you! who thought you the incarnation of goodness! Why did you do it?"

She lifted her tear-stained face.

"Because I loved you, Gilbert, and because I meant to break off my engagement to that man as soon as I could."

"You were engaged to him then; and knowing this you engaged yourself to me? May I inquire," he continued, with a sneer more cruel than his reproaches, "whether you intended to carry on the farce to the bitter end, and to marry us *both*?"

"Oh, do not be hard on me—do not be hard——" she sank down from her seat and fell on her knees at his feet, uplifting her clasped hands in piteous entreaty toward him; "do not be hard. Remember that I loved you."

"And yet, when I asked you—when I begged you to be open with me, to tell me the truth, when I laid bare

my own life to you, and told you all my past—yet you were afraid; and you spoke that pitiful lie, knowing that I should never forgive you!”

He spoke sternly, turning resolutely away, so that he should not see her streaming eyes, nor be softened by the sight of her pleading face.

She clung to his arm, dragging herself after him on her knees as he tried to move away from her.

“Oh forgive me—forgive me!” she wailed; “forgive me—take me back!”

“No; I will never forgive you,” he said coldly and angrily. “How could I ever believe in you again? Your lips would never again seem to me to speak the truth; your eyes would look deception, your every gesture would awaken my constant suspicion! How can a man take back so false a thing as you are?”

She rose, staggering blindly, to her feet. Her prayer, her humiliation had been in vain.

They stood a little way apart; he with averted head and gloomy brow, she white to the lips, her hands folded meekly across her breast, her eyes full of an unutterable tragedy fixed despairingly upon him.

“How could I tell that you would take it so cruelly?” she wailed; then, as he answered nothing, she said again, this time in a dull, far-away voice, that sounded dim and unreal even in her own ears, “Then it is all over?”

“Yes, it is all over,” he answered, and without another look he turned away and left the room.

The door closed softly behind him. There was an instant in which she did not move; then suddenly she put up both hands to her head, and, with a quick gasping breath, fell forward on to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXII.

ALL the next day Helen lay in bed in her darkened room. Her head was racked with pain; sleep had not once visited her during the whole night. She tossed about from side to side on her tumbled pillow, and could find no rest. She was in a burning fever. And all the time the aching anguish at her heart was worse, far worse to bear, than any mere physical pain.

Lady Camilla came once in the morning and stood by her bedside.

"You are very feverish, my dear—you had better let me send for the doctor. You are going to be ill, I am afraid," and she laid a not unkindly hand upon the girl's burning forehead.

"No, no; I am not ill," she moaned; "only let me lie here. I cannot get up."

"You shall not get up if you don't want to." Then, after a minute, she added, "Poor Mr. Warne is so unhappy; he cannot go away, he says, if you are ill. So I have asked him to stay on."

No answer; only Helen twisted herself round upon her pillows, and hid her face from her hostess's sight.

"Will you not send him a kind message, poor man?" asked Lady Camilla presently.

But there was no answer to her question, and after waiting vainly for a few minutes she stole away quietly from the room.

Later on in the day Mrs. Torrington, too, paid her a visit.

"How are you, my dear?" she said briskly. "Better, I hope? You must have caught a chill in London, I suppose. Are you not going to get up for dinner?"

"No; I want to be quiet," was her only answer.

"Dear me, what a bore it is, your being ill!" cried the widow cheerfully. "We are so dull without you. Your beloved is sulking in a chimney corner over the newspaper, Camilla is dozing over her "poor-work," and now that Gilbert has gone I haven't a soul to speak to."

Helen lifted herself a little upon her tumbled pillows, and looked at her.

"He has gone?" she asked faintly, fixing her haggard eyes upon her visitor.

"Oh dear, yes; he was off directly after breakfast, full of delight at the prospect of a week's capital pheasant shooting. Men always fall on their feet, my dear. If it can't be hunting, then it's shooting; or if they can't get either, then they can flirt and break some wretched woman's heart, by way of sport. Gilbert is a good hand at *that* game—as I dare say *you* have found out by now! For being able to make a complete and utter fool of any woman who is weak enough to listen to him, commend me to Gilbert Nugent of all men upon earth! You see I know his ways so well!"

"You—you think, then, that he fools women? That—that—he means nothing?"

"Think it! Why I know it, my dear child! For bound to me though he is, I often used to suffer myself on account of Gilbert's little ways. But I've got used to them by now; I've got used to them. I take no notice of the flirtations—that is the best way. I used to break my heart over them, but I have learnt wisdom. Just now, for instance, I might very easily be making myself wretched, seeing that Mrs. Delastair, whom he

has gone to stay with, is one of the most outrageous flirts I ever came across, and she is simply madly in love with Gilbert."

"But surely she is married? There is a Mr. Delastair, is there not?"

"To be sure there is, you sweet innocent! But you don't suppose that stands in the way, do you? Oh! Mrs. Delastair is not too particular, I assure you; and Gilbert is so weak, she can make him do anything. He is going to have a very fine time, indeed, with Mrs. Delastair, you may be certain—a real, desperate flirtation! But you see I am philosophical, and it doesn't trouble me."

Helen had closed her eyes. She lay back upon her pillows, pale and exhausted. Every word of the above speech seemed to cut into her heart like a knife. Dora looked at her curiously.

"I've given her something nice to lie and think about!" she thought viciously. "I'll teach her to come between me and mine again!"

"I wish you would go," said Helen presently, opening her eyes once more.

"Well, upon my word you are not particularly polite, my dear girl! Have I annoyed you by telling you the truth about our fascinating Gilbert? Try not to care, my dear—be philosophical, as I am! You see it doesn't disturb me much."

"Because you don't love him," said Helen coldly. "If you did, you could not endure to think that he had gone away to flirt with a horrid, married woman."

Dora laughed quite pleasantly. "Well, I wouldn't distress myself on his account, if I were you. Out of sight is out of mind with Gilbert Nugent, my dear, and any little notice he may have taken of you—"

"Will you go—go? Go!" she cried, driven almost past bearing. "Don't you see that I am ill, and I want to be let alone? Your very voice is a torture to me!"

"Oh, certainly, I will go. I am only sorry I took the trouble to come and see such an ungrateful, disagreeable young woman!" and the widow flounced out of the room in a pretended rage, slamming the door noisily after her as she went.

But outside in the passage she laughed again, for she was not at all angry really—she was only delighted. Delighted that she had been able to stab her enemy yet deeper with her cruel and malicious words—words for which there was not a shadow of foundation; for no one knew better than Mrs. Torrington did that, far from being the bold and unscrupulous flirt she had described her to be, Mrs. Delastair's whole character and conduct was so much above the shadow of a reproach as to lay her open to the imputation of being almost a prude.

The day wore to a close without bringing to Helen any relief. She continued perfectly prostrate. The hot fever of the first few hours had abated, and she remained only so weak that she was incapable either of thought or of movement.

"All is over," she said to herself aloud more than once, repeating the last words he had spoken to her, with a sort of dull apathy.

If life could only have been over as well. But when our hearts are broken we are not often permitted to lay down the burden of existence, too. We are forced to get up, maimed and faint and bruised as we are, to take up that load once more, and to carry it on in some fashion to the end.

At twenty, too, there is still so much of life before us

to be got over—so little of it left behind. And if once the young spirit be crushed and subdued out of its glad independence, who can tell how easily it may not be coerced and broken down?

No one knew this better than did Lady Camilla. That was probably why she had pressed Frederick Warne to remain at Old Park until Helen should be better.

Hearts, it is well known, have been caught at the rebound; and in the absence of both her elderly admirer and the more dangerously fascinating Nugent, Helen, thought her enemies, might very possibly be persuaded to console herself with the constancy and undoubted devotion of the lover of her youth.

It was decreed that pressure should be brought to bear upon her.

With the evening, Mr. Greyson returned home, and great was his amazement at finding Mr. Frederick Warne installed on a familiar footing in his own house.

“Who, in the name of fortune, is this fellow you have got staying here?” he inquired irritably of his wife, when she had followed him upstairs into his dressing-room.

“You may well ask, my dear!” replied Lady Camilla, laughing. “Isn’t he an awful creature? However, it’s not my doing that he is here, as you may imagine. He came to see Helen Dacre. It appears he is engaged to be married to her, but she is treating him rather badly, poor man. She pretended to be ill, and has stopped in her bed all day, and the man refuses to go away without seeing her. What on earth was I to do?”

“What confounded nonsense! Why don’t you make her get up? But, I say, my love, how about your little

plans for her? What a sly puss she must be to have kept this engagement dark. Well, anyhow, let us hope it will take her safely out of harm's way, as far as Bainton is concerned."

"I am sure I hope so. But what am I to do with her if she wont get up? We don't want this young man quartered upon us forever."

"Certainly not. Make her get up and see him this evening. Tell her she must come down to dinner—say that I have said she must, if you like. Then the man can go by the ten o'clock train to-morrow morning, and we shall get rid of him; and, my love, had you not better write to Bainton?"

Lady Camilla was less prepared to adopt this suggestion than the previous one; but, armed with her husband's authority, she marched up forthwith to Helen's bedroom, poked the fire, lit the candles upon the dressing-tables, and sat herself down resolutely by the side of the bed.

"Now, my dear child, you really must exercise a little self-control. You cannot lie in bed forever, and it is time that you should get up and join the rest of the family. Mr. Greyson has returned, and he particularly desires you to come down to dinner. You say that you are not ill, and will not let me send for the doctor, so that there can be no reason for your remaining in bed any longer. There is an hour before dinner; so now get up at once, like a good child, and I will send your maid to you."

Helen lifted herself a little upon her pillows and fixed her eyes, haggard and disfigured by weeping, upon her.

"Has Mr. Warne gone away?" she asked. "If he has, I will get up."

"No; he has not gone away, and he refuses to do so

until he has seen you once more. Really, Helen, you are very inconsiderate. Don't you see to what inconvenience you are putting Mr. Greyson and myself by your obstinacy? I have, of course, been glad to be civil to Mr. Warne for your sake; but naturally we don't want him here forever, and Mr. Greyson has friends of his own coming to stay to-morrow; and—in point of fact—we want his room."

"Why don't you tell him so?"

"I have done so, but he will not take the hint. All he says is, that when he has seen you he will go—not before."

Helen sank back despairingly.

"I will not see him—I will not see him!" she began somewhat wildly; then all at once she became calmer, and in a different voice she added, "I am very ungrateful, Lady Camilla! You must forgive me. I will try and do as you wish; but oh! will you not help me? will you not advise me?" She reached out her hands and took hold of Lady Camilla's, bending her face down so that she could feel the hot tears that dropped one by one upon them.

"I have no one," she wailed, "no one to help me. Oh, you are so much older and wiser. Can you not tell me what to do? I cannot marry Frederick Warne. I do not love him. How am I to escape from it? Oh, do—do help me!"

For a moment Lady Camilla's heart misgave her. That piteous appeal from the orphan girl, those scalding tears upon her hands, that trembling prayer for help, touched even her cold and selfish nature with pity.

"You, who are a mother," continued poor Helen, in her misery, "will you not be as a mother to me, who have none?" But at those words Lady Camilla remembered

Ted and his prospects, and hardened herself quickly again into granite.

"My dear Helen, I will give you my advice with pleasure," she answered coldly, "although I fear that you will not like what I am going to say; for most distinctly do I believe it to be your duty to keep your plighted word, given years ago to Mr. Warne, who is a most estimable young man, and who does not deserve to be jilted in so shameful a manner. I must, therefore, request you to get up at once, and to come downstairs and give him a proper answer to his wishes."

Helen dropped Lady Camilla's hands, and dashed her tears away from her eyes. Her head fell back upon her pillows, and a little hopeless sigh broke from her lips.

There was no help for her here, then. She had made her little appeal, and had failed; and now there was no one but herself to be depended on. But was there no one? Had she not still one friend?

Suddenly an entirely new idea flashed into her mind—taking her breath away a little as it did so.

"Now promise me to get up, Helen," Lady Camilla was saying to her, once more; "be a good child, and get up at once."

"If you will go away I will get up," answered Helen; "and I will come downstairs—not to dinner, but immediately afterward."

Lady Camilla deemed it wiser to be satisfied with this concession, and murmuring a few words of approbation, left the room.

No sooner had the door closed upon her than Helen sprang from her bed. She had no time to lose.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was so short a time ago since Helen had been travelling homeward from London in the darkness of a winter evening, that to find herself once more in the train seemed only like a curious continuation of her previous adventures in London. The last two days and their incidents, the loss of her lover's affection, the persecution she had endured from Frederick Warne and from Lady Camilla, her own illness and despair—all seemed like a horrible and unreal nightmare, out of which she had fought and struggled vainly to awaken, but from which the rushing train was now bearing her every moment farther and farther away.

And yet, when the many lights of London began to shine out feebly on every side through the dark and murky atmosphere, a terrible sense of her loneliness and of the desperate straits which had driven her into flight from the house that had been her home during the last two months, reminded her but too surely that her unhappiness was true and actual enough.

It had all been so hurried. From the moment when, upon Lady Camilla's cruel and heartless repulse, she had suddenly resolved that nothing on earth should force her into another interview with Frederick Warne, and that to avoid it she would make her escape from her tormentors, until the moment when she had put that idea into execution, and had actually turned her back forever upon Old Park—she had scarcely had time to breathe, far less to realize the importance of the step

she was about to take, nor to weigh its possible consequences.

She dressed herself quickly and quietly, without summoning her maid; then, packing a dressing-bag with a few indispensable necessities, she wrapped herself up warmly in a long fur cloak, and concealed her face beneath a thick veil. Thus equipped, she awaited the moment when the inmates of the house were all occupied with dinner in the dining-room, in order to creep noiselessly downstairs and out at the front door.

To walk down the avenue, along the frozen road to the village, and from thence to take the village fly to the station, had been a simple and easy matter. She had plenty of money with her, and when she made the good people at the public-house understand that she meant to catch the eight-forty up train, and was ready to pay handsomely if they helped her to do so, she encountered no difficulty in carrying out her wishes. That she was easily recognized as the young lady staying at the big house did not disturb her, because it must certainly be over an hour before any alarm as to her disappearance could be given at the house, and by then she would be well on her way to London; and there was, moreover, no later train by which she could be followed.

So she effected her escape quite easily, and without the slightest hindrance. But when the journey was over, and she got to the London terminus, she began for the first time to realize that she had taken a desperate step, and that she was indeed alone in the world.

Her experience of London was small. She had never been alone in the great city before, and when she found herself in a four-wheeled cab with her bag by her side, all sorts of foolish fears and apprehensions beset her.

The way to Portman Square seemed interminable; the endless turnings of the narrow streets bewildered her. She knew neither where she was nor whither she was going, and the sickly glare of the gaslights through the yellow fog did nothing to enlighten the position. She had read stories—who has not?—of cabmen who have been evil characters, and who have driven ignorant and lonely female passengers into foul slums, and there have robbed or even murdered them; and, although no doubt such fancies are exceedingly silly and far-fetched, yet she could not help recalling these tales of horror and dwelling personally upon the possibility of their being repeated in her own case.

It was indeed a relief to her when, after what seemed to her over an hour of objectless turnings and twistings in every conceivable direction, the cab drew up at length before a lofty portico, and the cabman—a most respectable father of a family, if she had only known it—descended from his box and put his head in at the window.

“Shall I ring the bell, miss?”

“Is this the house?” asked Helen, peering nervously out, through the fog. And then, to her unspeakable relief, it seemed to her that she recognized the door.

“This is Number 52, Portman Square, fast enough. Shall I ring?”

“Yes, please—or, no—let me out, please.”

The man opened the door and helped her out, and carried the bag on to the doorstep. Then, with that discrimination concerning the innocence and ignorance of his “fares” which the London cabman usually displays, he boldly and unblushingly asked exactly double the money to which he was lawfully entitled.

Helen, knowing no better, paid it without a word,

and cabby, remounting his box with a civil "Thank ye, miss," and an internal chuckle over his own acuteness, drove away into the fog and was seen no more.

Helen and her bag waited upon the doorstep. It seemed a very long time before anybody answered the bell, and she was upon the point of ringing again, when she heard approaching footsteps across the flagged hall within, and the door opened. An insolent-looking young footman, still struggling into one sleeve of the coat he had leisurely donned upon the summons of the door-bell, looked out at her.

"Is Lord Bainton at home?" inquired Helen timidly.

"Yes; he is at home—but you can't see him," was the uncivil reply.

"Oh, but I must see him if he is at home," said Helen, making a movement to enter the house. But the youth stood well before the open door and barred the way.

"My horders is to hadmit no one," he said impudently. "No hadmittance 'ere hexcept on business. So you clear off, young woman."

It was certain that Helen could not enter into physical opposition with a footman; and yet, short of endeavoring to push by him by force, there seemed to be no chance of her effecting an entrance into her guardian's house. Crimson with shame and with anger, too, she was on the point of drawing back in despair, when over the footman's head she perceived the form of the portly butler, advancing to the assistance of his inferior officer. The footman she had never seen before; but, to her unspeakable relief, she remembered the butler perfectly, having seen him on the only occasion that she had been to the house before, when her guardian had brought her up from Aberdare House to London last September.

She called him by name, and Davis came quickly forward.

"Why, gracious me, it's Miss Dacre!" he exclaimed. "Out of the way, Charles; don't you see it's a lady? Stand aside and let Miss Dacre in, and take her bag at once, you blockhead."

"My horders was to hadmit no one," grumbled the crestfallen Charles; "'ow was I to know who a young person on foot, with no luggage to speak of, might chance to be?"

"Can't you tell a lady when you see one?" retorted his chief angrily. "I'm sure I hope you'll excuse him, miss; he only come in last week, and he haven't learnt any manners yet." Which was rather hard upon Charles, who, after all, had only done exactly what he had been told to do.

When she was inside the hall, which was large and well warmed with a blazing fire, Helen turned again to the butler.

"I want to see my guardian at once, please, Davis. Can you take me to him?"

"Dear me, miss, I hope there is no bad news from Old Park that has brought you up so sudden? Her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship is perfectly well. There is nothing amiss," answered Helen quickly, and her heart began to beat as she spoke. "Tell Lord Bainton that it is quite upon my own affairs that I have come to London. Go to him at once."

"I am very sorry, miss—I cannot. The doctor is with him—"

"The doctor!" repeated Helen, falling back. "He is ill, then?"

"Very ill, I am afraid. He did not wish Lady

Camilla to know anything, so I must ask you not to mention it; but his lordship has been unwell ever since he came to town, and this morning he was so much worse he sent for his own physician, Dr. Wright, and Dr. Wright wished for a second opinion, so we were expecting Sir Augustus Rolls every minute for a consultation. That was how it was Charles was told so specially not to admit anybody, if you will kindly make that excuse for him, miss."

"Oh, say no more about that," cried Helen; "it doesn't matter at all." And then, poor child, because she was so tired and faint and troubled, and because this bad news about her only friend had come upon her so suddenly, she sank down upon a carved oak chair and burst into tears.

Davis was much distressed, and entreated her to come into the library, where there was a fire and a lamp, and at that moment a carriage without was heard to pull up at the door, and the bell rang loudly.

"That must be Sir Augustus," said Davis, as he hurried Helen into the library. "I will send the housekeeper to you, miss."

After a few minutes the housekeeper—a kind-faced, motherly person—made her appearance, and Helen soon found herself kindly treated and deferentially waited upon. Her walking things were taken from her, a pair of shoes from her small luggage placed upon her feet, in the place of her damp and heavy boots, and a tray with food and wine was brought to her.

But, although she was, in truth, exhausted for want of rest and nourishment, she could neither sit still for many seconds, nor could she swallow more than a few mouthfuls of bread and wine.

The knowledge that those doctors upstairs were sit-

ting in conclave over her guardian's condition; the fear that his life might be in danger; and the knowledge that she could do nothing for him but sit helpless until, perhaps, the worst of news should be brought to her, drove her into a perfect fever of suspense and anxiety.

She thought over all Lord Bainton's kindness and affection to her, recalling numberless instances of his forethought and consideration; and she reproached herself bitterly that she had undervalued his devotion, and never done or said enough to express to him her appreciation of his goodness to her. Even his unfortunate desire to marry her, that had scared and horrified her so much, in the face of real illness and danger ceased to shock and terrify her. She felt that if only his life might be spared, and his health restored, there was nothing on earth which she would not do to prove her gratitude to him.

After all, she thought, as she sat counting the weary moments, whilst miserable tears flowed again and again from her eyes—after all, what other friend had she on earth but him? Lady Camilla had turned against her, and striven to drive her into a hateful union; Mrs. Torrington had tricked and betrayed her; the man she loved had condemned and renounced her. She had no other friend on earth but Lord Bainton. To him alone could she turn for help, and if he were to die—oh! what then was to become of her?

It was nearly an hour before a sudden opening and shutting of doors and rapid footsteps across the hall without, together with a confused murmur of voices, told her that the doctors were at length taking their departure. Helen, pale with alarm and anxiety, sprang from her seat and rushed to the door. She was just in time to see the two elderly and serious-looking physicians ushered out of the house by the bowing Davis.

"Well?" she cried, rushing across the hall, as the butler closed and barred the mahogany doors. She could not utter another word, but her white and anxious face looked the rest.

"Well, miss, I am thankful to tell you that there is good hopes of his lordship's getting over this attack."

"Thank God! thank God!"

"It seems he have had a sort of a fit; but there has been no return of it, and no signs of any return; and Sir Augustus says if he can keep right for the next twenty-four hours or so he will, in all human probability, pull through, and be able to be about again. Only, in course, he must be kept quite quiet."

"Then, I fear, I cannot see him."

"Not to-night, miss."

"Can I not help to nurse him?"

"There is a nurse upstairs the doctors have sent. No, miss, you can do nothing but go to bed, and the sooner the better, if I might be so bold as to say so."

"You did not tell him I was here?"

"No, Miss Dacre. But I told the doctors, and they said that if he has a good night and they find in the morning that he is going on well, it would do him good to see you, very likely; so you see there is nothing for it but patience, miss—and there's your bedroom all ready for you. So if you will go upstairs the housemaid shall wait on you, and we must hope for better news in the morning."

So Helen went to bed; and so worn out was she by all the changes and emotions of this weary and eventful day, that no sooner had she laid her head upon her pillow than she fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, and never woke again until it was broad daylight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

To meet again a person whom we have last seen in robust health, after serious illness, however brief, has laid its touch upon him, must always be productive of a certain shock to the feelings of a sensitive person. For it is impossible but that sickness should create a subtle change in the familiar face and form which we have been accustomed to see in health and activity.

Helen—when, toward noon on the following day, she was ushered into the dimly lighted bedroom where her guardian, propped up on his pillows, awaited her visit—was immediately conscious of an indefinable alteration in him.

It is not too little to say that, in spite of the favorable and encouraging report which the doctors had given of him at their morning visit, and in spite of the apparently slight nature of the attack he had gone through, she had no sooner caught sight of the white face and hollow eyes, of the wasted hands eagerly held out to greet her, than a sudden conviction struck like a cold chill to her heart, and she felt that death had set his mark upon the man.

She was certain of it. Later on she doubted and wavered—hope asserted itself once more—and she strove to persuade herself that her own ignorance and nervousness had led her into terrors that had no foundation; yet all these after-thoughts never completely sufficed to wipe out that first and dire impression which his appearance made upon her as she entered his room.

"My dearest child!" he said, in a faint voice, as he took her hand in his. "This is indeed a pleasure. I hear that you came last night. You must have divined, I think, by magic, how much I longed for you. Sit down. Sit down, my dear."

His evident delight touched her. She took the chair by his bedside which had been set for her, and made inquiries after his health.

"Oh, I am better—much better," he answered hurriedly. "I shall cheat the doctors yet. But never mind me; tell me of yourself. Why have you come to your old guardian? Have you changed your mind about what I asked you, and have you come to tell me so?"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Helen hastily, withdrawing her hand from his and coloring painfully. "How can you suppose me capable of such lack of modesty? Even if I had, as you suggest, changed my mind—which I could never, never do—I should at all events not be so unwomanly as to come to your house to tell you so."

The sick man's head fell back upon his pillow; the little flush of excitement faded quickly from his face. Helen, glancing apprehensively at him, saw that a gray pallor swept over his features at her words.

"Oh, do not be angry with me," she cried remorsefully.

"Angry! I can never be angry with you, child. I am only disappointed—so dreadfully disappointed." And then he sighed so deeply that it went to her heart.

There were a few moments of silence. Lord Bainton closed his eyes wearily, as though he had nothing more to say, and Helen felt painfully embarrassed. Presently she spoke again, in a low and timid voice—

"May I not tell you why I have come to you, my dear, kind guardian?"

He opened his eyes again and smiled faintly at her. "To be sure; tell me anything you like. Is my sister here, too? I did not want her to know I had been ill, for, you see, I am nearly well again now; but ill news flies fast, and perhaps she has heard of it and is in London?"

"No; Lady Camilla is not in town. Dear Lord Bainton, I have a dreadful confession to make. I have left Old Park. I came away alone and without telling anybody. I crept out of the house when they were at dinner. Nobody saw me go——"

"You mean you ran away? My dear child, but this is very serious! What induced you to take such an extraordinary step? Why, we must telegraph to Old Park at once—Camilla will be frightened to death." He stretched out his hand to the call-bell on the table by his side, but Helen laid her hand on his and stopped him.

"No; do not telegraph. Do not send to Lady Camilla. I will never go back to Old Park. It is because I can no longer remain under your sister's care that I have come here, to throw myself upon your protection."

"Good heavens! What has Camilla done to you? Were you not happy with her?"

"Perfectly, until she invited Frederick Warne to stay in the house, and tried to persuade me that it was my duty to marry him."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lord Bainton faintly.

"That is why," continued Helen, "I have come to you—for safety—for protection, dear Lord Bainton. It cannot be my duty, can it, to marry a man I loathe and detest? You will not hand me over to him, will you?"

"My dearest child, of course not! Why, God bless

my soul, what on earth can have possessed Camilla to have that dreadful young man in her house? How did he get there?"

"I do not know. Mrs. Torrington and I came up to London for one night three days ago—we came for some shopping she wanted to do, and to see a play—and when we got home again that man was in the house."

"Aha! that Torrington woman was in it, was she? I begin to understand. She and Camilla have been playing into each other's hands."

"Mr. Warne seems to think he has a right——"

"He has no right—none whatever——"

"Of course I did once promise to marry him; but I was very young, and it is a long time ago; and surely it cannot be my duty now——"

"Duty! I never heard of such a ridiculous idea! It is not a question of duty at all; besides, you cannot marry anybody till you are twenty-one without my consent. All that business goes for nothing. I told him so at the time. What on earth has put it into his head to presume to raise the subject again?"

"He has some letters of mine——"

"The devil he has! What sort of letters—love letters?"

"I am afraid they might be called so—not that I ever cared for him; but I was very young and friendless, and——"

"My dear, do not remind me of the years I left you at that school—left you to fall into such a miserable mistake as this engagement! If you only knew how bitterly I reproach myself often for it! My only excuse, Helen, is that I had not seen you for so long I did not know what a sweet and charming young woman you had become. Still, I can never forgive myself."

"Dear Lord Bainton, do not distress yourself. It was not your fault, and, besides, my engagement was my own doing. And these letters——"

"Can you not get them back? Have you asked for them?"

"Over and over again; but he will not give them up. I am afraid—it is a dreadful idea—but I am afraid he thinks he can make use of them—bring an action against me."

Lord Bainton frowned heavily. "Whether or no he can do so, he can at any rate make himself exceedingly offensive to you and to me, my dear. We must see what money will do. I might be able to buy them back. I cannot permit you to be subjected to annoyance from this odious person's persecutions." Then, suddenly turning toward her with a sad, but infinitely tender smile, "Ah, my dear Helen," he added, "why will you not give me the right to protect you, in the only efficient way possible, against all troubles and worries of this nature?"

She made no answer. She understood him well enough, but she could not speak. If only there had been no one else but Frederick Warne. But there was that other secret fast locked in her heart—that other lover whom she had deceived, and who had given her up, but whom she loved still with her whole heart!

"I could have married Lord Bainton if I had never known Gilbert Nugent," she said to herself.

Then the nurse came into the room to put an end to her visit, and there was nothing more to be said. She crept away from the sick room, softly and noiselessly, promising to come again and see him later on in the day.

"Think over what I say," he called out to her, as she went out.

She smiled and nodded, but said nothing, as she closed the door.

Long after she had left him, the earl lay quietly, with closed eyes, upon his bed, and the nurse thought that he was dozing. But his brain had never been more fully awake nor his thoughts more active. His anger against the underbred schoolmaster who had dared to aspire to the woman he loved himself, was very great; but his anger against his own sister, who, for the furtherance of her own very patent projects, had played into Warne's hands in so unscrupulous a manner, was far deeper and more bitter. His indignation against her was so great, that to frustrate her artifices and to punish her for her treachery, occupied the whole of his mind. The Earl of Bainton perhaps knew, at his heart of hearts, that his days on earth were numbered.

"If anything were to happen to me," he said to himself, using mechanically that vague form of words concerning the only absolute certainty which existence holds for all of us—"If anything were to happen to me, what would become of her? And how can I best protect her against the jealousy and the avarice of those who will surround her?"

How was he to reach out his hands from beyond the grave to protect her who for whom he experienced, perhaps, the first and only unselfish affection of his life? The answer came to him slowly and after a long time. Then he sighed, and again he murmured, half aloud to himself, upon his bed—

"Yes; that would be the way. She would be safe, then, from them all; but would she consent—would she consent?"

Mrs. Hogan, bending down to catch the muttered

words, fancied that his mind was wandering; but Lord Bainton had never been clearer-headed in his life.

"What was that?" he said presently, sharply and quite loudly.

"Nothing, my lord," replied the woman.

"Yes; it was the hall-doorbell, and a cab has stopped at the door. Somebody has come in. Ring the bell and inquire."

"It doesn't matter, my lord. They wont trouble you, whoever it is, and it's too early for the doctor, yet. Davis wont admit any one else."

"I tell you some one is in the house. I hear voices in the room below. Ring the bell and ask."

And the earl, in spite of his weakened state and failing powers, was perfectly right; for downstairs, in the room beneath, standing with his back to the fire, upon the hearth-rug, stood at that very moment no less a person than Mr. Frederick Warne—serene, self-important, and filled with a sublime confidence in himself and in the success of his errand.

CHAPTER XXV.

"HE called me his 'good fellow,' " said Davis, with indignation, afterward, in the dignified seclusion of the housekeeper's room, when relating how Mr. Warne had walked past and over him, literally and figuratively into the library. "Me—as has lived with his lordship for twenty years. He asked if Miss Dacre was stopping here, and of course, having no occasion in my position of life to tell lies, I admitted that she was, but that she was out—and he says, 'Then I'll come in and wait till she comes in'; and I says, 'No, sir, you can't; because what I means is, Miss Dacre is "out" to visitors, and she will certainly not see you, because the earl is lying ill upstairs, and my orders is to admit no one but the doctor.' But I might as well have spoken to the wind, for he takes me by the shoulders and shoves me aside—as if I was a paltry under-footman—and says, 'Stand out of my way, my good fellow, and go and tell Miss Dacre at once that I mean to stop here till I see her.' "

"Shameful!" ejaculated the sympathetic Mrs. Simms. "Whoever can he be?"

"He's no gentleman, anyhow," chimed in the cook. "And what did Miss Dacre do?"

"Why, she went as white as ashes, and she says, 'Oh, don't let my guardian know, Davis—it will upset him so much; but perhaps I had better see the gentleman.' "

"Pretty creature. What a shame to trouble her! Some begging chap, I'll be bound he is."

"Well, she gets up and goes out of the drawing-room down to the library door, and I says to her, 'Miss, if you should want anything you just ring the bell loud, and I'll come up at once.' And she nodded her head and went in—and there! my stars!—there goes the bell! I must be off!" and away hurried Davis, as fast as his fat legs would carry him up the kitchen staircase.

Frederick Warne was fully convinced of the justice of his cause. He had come to Portman Square, at Lady Camilla's suggestion, full of virtuous indignation. Helen's conduct was shameful and irrational, and he took no small credit to himself that he was still prepared to marry her in spite of it.

When she entered the library he met her with stern and angry reproaches.

"Unhappy girl!" he cried, fixing his small, weak eyes reprovably upon her, and standing with his legs apart and his hands behind his coat-tails, in the attitude which had often reduced his pupils into trembling submission.

"What have you done? Into what fatal position has your headstrong insubordination led you?"

"I really don't know what you mean, Mr. Warne," replied Helen quietly. "I am certainly unhappy, because my only friend on earth is lying very ill upstairs; but what there is 'fatal' in my position I fail to perceive."

"Then, indeed, you must have lost every womanly instinct, if you cannot even see how you have imperilled your reputation."

"Mr. Warne! Are you mad?"

"Do not interrupt me. Lady Camilla directed me to come here, hoping that we might discover your address; but neither she nor I could have conceived it

possible that you would be actually staying in this house—alone—with no lady to protect you.”

“Why, where else could I stay with greater safety than under the roof of the guardian to whose care my father left me? What is there dreadful about it?”

“You fail to see. Here you are alone, with no protection, in the house of an unmarried man—a man, too, who has not borne the best of names all his life with regard to women.”

“Be silent!” cried Helen angrily. “How dare you insinuate disgraceful things against such a man as Lord Bainton? He has been goodness itself to me. I will not hear him maligned. Besides”—and she laughed contemptuously—“at such a time as this it is not only wicked, it is also ridiculous, to say such things. Lord Bainton is very ill—he is in bed—there is a sick nurse in attendance——”

“You have not seen him, then?”

“Of course I have seen him.”

Mr. Warne cast up his hands with a gesture of horror.

“Why should I not see him, pray? You seem to forget that he is an old man, and that he is in the position of a father to me.”

“Miserable girl!” cried the schoolmaster. “Are you indeed so ignorant, and so lost to all sense of right or wrong, that you do not understand what the world—what all good women—will say of your position here? A man who is no relation to you is protected neither by age nor by illness. Lord Bainton knows this well enough. Did he not have a married lady to travel with you when he took you abroad? What will be said of you if you persist in casting aside the decencies and proprieties of life? My dear child, I entreat you to do what is right before it is too late and your rash and

inconsiderate step has become known and commented on. Come down at once to Aberdare House, to the protection of my dear aunt. I will not even go with you. Take some woman servant from this house, or I will telegraph to my aunt, and, old as she is, I know she will come up by the very first train and fetch you away. Believe me, you cannot stay here."

For a moment or two Helen was staggered. What he said to her was very terrible. She had not thought of it before in this light. Was it indeed true that she was risking her own good name by remaining in her guardian's house?—that women would speak lightly of her by reason of it?

Then quickly there came another thought. "If I do as you wish," she said, "will you cease to persecute me to marry you? Will you release me from my engagement and give me back my letters?"

Frederick Warne laughed contemptuously. "I shall make no bargain of that kind, Helen. Your letters are too precious to me. I cannot give them up."

Helen saw instantly that no compromise was possible. She perceived that all this fine talk about her reputation and her anomalous position in the house of her guardian meant nothing at all but a scheme to get her away from the protection which Portman Square afforded her, in order to place her once more in that hated prison of her girlhood—under an influence which might, perhaps, induce her at length to marry this man against her will. She saw at once that Frederick Warne's covetousness would not suffer him to give up his claim upon her. He did not care about her good name; that was a mere trumped-up bogey to frighten her. What he did care about was her fortune, and his own chances of getting hold of it. With this conviction her courage rose. She

shook off the disturbance his cruel words had caused her, and confronted him once more.

"Mr. Warne," she said very quietly, "it seems to me that this matter is a question of money. How much will you take to give me back my letters?"

"You insult me, Helen"

"Not so much as you insult me. I am willing to pay you—or, at any rate, Lord Bainton is willing to do so."

"Pay me! I never heard of such a thing. How can anything repay a man for his wounded affections and disappointed hopes?"

"We will leave your affections out of the question, if you please."

"Helen! you wrong me—indeed, you do. I have the deepest and sincerest feelings for you, and if I spoke of bringing an action against you, it is not that I wish to carry things to that length; but that I hope you will yield to me before you force me into a proceeding which would be most distasteful to me. It is not, as you imply, a question of money—it is a question of principle—it is for your own good that I long to take you out of this life of fashion and of folly, and, I may add, of actual danger—back to that safe sphere of sobriety and usefulness in which my aunt so carefully brought you up."

At that moment Frederick Warne honestly believed himself to be actuated by the most disinterested motives.

"I will make you a good husband," he continued, almost plaintively. "Indeed I will. You shall never have cause to regret——"

"We will not discuss this subject any more," interrupted Helen hastily. "I shall never be your wife. I feel and know that I have, perhaps, treated you badly, and that I owe you some reparation. If you will give me back those letters and allow the subject to drop,

you shall be paid. Beyond that I can say nothing, and also I must absolutely refuse to see you again."

"That is nonsense"—and this time Frederick Warne lost his temper, and spoke angrily and roughly. "I shall bring my aunt here to-morrow. She will, perhaps, be able to bring you to your senses, and to a realization of your duty."

"This is intolerable!" cried Helen, and with a rapid movement across the room, she rang the bell loudly.

"Miss Fairbrother will not be so ill-advised, I hope, as to attempt to enter my guardian's house upon such an errand."

"Miss Fairbrother has courage enough to enter any house in a righteous and excellent cause," retorted her tormentor.

"Davis, show this gentleman to the door," was Helen's only reply, as the respectable form of the butler, panting a little from the speed with which he had responded to her summons, appeared upon the scene.

Casting a look of rage and malice at the girl's white and angry face, Mr. Frederick Warne took up his hat and went.

He would, perhaps, have been consoled could he have looked back into the room and seen Helen five minutes after his departure.

Face downward upon the sofa, the girl lay sobbing as if her heart would break. Never had utter despair and loneliness so overwhelmed her before. It is true that she had never been loved and cared for as other girls. All her life long she had been ignorant of that tender affection which shelters the early years of most young creatures. She had always been thrown upon strangers, and her warm heart had longed in vain for sympathy and comprehension; but there had come to

her at last that wonderful change in her fortunes which had transfigured her whole life, and for a brief space she had deluded herself into believing that her money had procured for her the love and the friendship for which she had always pined so intensely. But now a rude awakening had come to her, and she saw herself surrounded on every side, not by friends but by foes. Avarice, cruelty, and treachery were what her money had earned for her, and it was small wonder that she felt herself to be helpless and almost hopeless among the hideous passions of those who were ready to sacrifice her to their own ends and ambitions.

She had only one friend in the world—only one who cared for her, for herself, and was ready to help and stand by her—that sick man upstairs upon his bed! Every one else had forsaken or been false to her. She had no other hope on earth save in him.

After a time her tears ceased to flow, and she lay quite still with clasped hands, and her great sorrowful eyes gazed blankly and miserably out into the sombre, half-lit room. Now and again, as the thoughts of the man she loved, and whose faith and trust she had lost for ever, crossed her mind, she shivered a little.

“If I had only been braver,” she moaned aloud once. “If I had only told him the truth. But it is all over now—all over.” And then she lay very still again. She had no hope from that quarter; she did not even know where he was, and if she had known she would not have applied to him. She believed that Gilbert Nugent was a man who would never forgive a lie from the woman he loved. It was the one unpardonable sin, no doubt—and she had committed it.

After what seemed to her a very long time, although it was in fact little more than half an hour, she rose

from the sofa and rang the bell. She felt weak and cold, and her limbs ached. It was as if she had been very ill.

When Davis came to the door he was shocked by her pale and altered looks.

"I want to speak to the earl; will you please go and ask the nurse when I can see him."

"You will have some dinner first, miss; wont you? You look so tired."

"No. Very well—yes; I will eat something; but go and find out first when Lord Bainton will see me. Say that I must speak to him to-night before I go to bed."

Presently Davis came back to tell her that his master would see her in an hour's time. "I will bring you something to eat at once, miss," he added, as he left the room; and Helen sat down and waited with much the same feeling, perhaps, as a condemned criminal awaits his execution.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GILBERT NUGENT, up in Yorkshire, was not enjoying his visit to the Delastairs in the least. It is true that the sport was excellent, and that he himself was shooting in his best form; true also that the party staying in the house was congenial and agreeable to him, whilst as for the house itself, it was what it always had been—the most charming house in all England. The host and hostess were the soul of hospitality, the cook was faultless, and every arrangement, both indoors and out, was so admirably carried out that nothing was left to be desired. Surely a man must be difficult to please indeed who could not make himself thoroughly happy at Holmby Hall! Yet, in spite of all this, Nugent was undeniably miserable.

He was preoccupied and absent, and often, in the midst of the most animated conversation, he remained silent and abstracted, his thoughts miles away from what was going on about him. His host rallied him frequently upon his low spirits, and the other guests in the house told each other that Nugent was no longer the cheery and delightful companion of old days, and that evidently some trouble or annoyance weighed upon his mind.

“When a man is out of gear it’s generally his liver that is out of order,” opined old Colonel Wortley, who had been in India for many years, and knew by experience what a curse a man’s liver may be to him.

“Or, more likely, it’s money,” suggested a subaltern

on long leave, whose Christmas bills were still following him perseveringly about the country from house to house, spoiling his daily appetite for breakfast by their matutinal persistency.

"Or, perhaps, it may be love," remarked a young lady who had gone through an unhappy love affair herself, and felt kindred sympathy for all those similarly affected.

"It is probably a mixture of all three," said Mr. Delastair, with a laugh. "Clara"—turning to his wife—"can you not unravel the mystery concerning our friend—you, who are the acknowledged *confidante* of all young men and maidens in distress?"

Mrs. Delastair, a sweet-faced, fair-haired woman, with a gentle manner and an air of refinement that more than replaced in her any claim to actual beauty, looked up with a smile.

"If Mr Nugent wants my sympathy, Henry, you may be quite sure that he will receive it. Perhaps, poor fellow, the cause of his trouble is not difficult to guess?"

And everybody knew at once that Mrs. Delastair was alluding to the unfortunate influence of Mrs. Torrington in Gilbert Nugent's life; for there were very few people in society who had not heard or seen for themselves how complete a slave the unhappy young man had been for years to that undesirable little person.

Gilbert Nugent entering the room at this moment, the conversation came naturally to an abrupt conclusion; but that same evening after dinner, Mrs. Delastair, finding herself by chance sitting upon the same sofa with Nugent, in a retired corner of the large drawing-room, found the courage to say to her guest:

"What is the matter with you, Mr. Nugent? Henry and I think you seem in such bad spirits. I trust nothing is amiss with you?"

Nugent was startled out of a reverie of his own, and looked up quickly at his hostess. Mrs. Delastair had such a gentle voice and such a sweet, womanly face that those in trouble often felt themselves impelled as though by an irresistible magnetism to confide in her. She was trustworthy, too. She never betrayed a confidence, or took advantage of a moment of weakness. Her husband used to say of her laughingly; "Clara is the recipient of half the confessions of woe in England; but I can never get any of them out of her. She can hold her tongue, which is more than most women can do, even to her own husband."

So, perhaps, it was no wonder that Gilbert, who had always liked and respected her, found himself answering with a groan:—

"Everything is amiss with me, Mrs. Delastair."

"Tell me your trouble, Mr. Nugent," she replied softly; "perhaps I may be able to help you. Or at any rate it may relieve your mind to talk it over with me. Is it—is it—forgive me if I am indiscreet—is it the old tie?"

"Yes—to a great extent. Oh, Mrs. Delastair, you have no conception what a dreadful burden it is!"

"Why not be a man and break through it? Why don't you find some nice, good girl and marry her?"

"Ah, that is just the worst of it;" and then he told her how he had fallen in love with such a girl, and how, for her sake, he had determined to free himself from his false position with Mrs. Torrington, because he believed that his love was returned; but how the girl he loved was false, and had told him a lie; how she herself had a past that was not without a story, and was bound by an undesirable engagement which she had kept a secret from him and which he had suddenly discovered;

and that how, because she had told him what was not true, he had left her for ever. Yet he could not forget her, and he was utterly wretched, though he supposed there was nothing for it but to go on in the same miserable way. Perhaps, indeed, he had better marry Dora Torrington at once and have done with it. Perhaps he owed it to her, poor woman, to clear her name from slander. Perhaps that would be the best thing to do.

"Pray do nothing of the kind, Mr. Nugent. There can be no object to be gained by making yourself miserable for the rest of your life," interrupted Mrs. Delastair, with energy; "and don't you think that it would be braver and more manly if you were to free yourself from this yoke?"

"What would be the good of it? I have lost the other."

"It always seems to me to make difficult things simpler if we leave out considerations of that kind—if we do what is right, simply because it *is* right, and not because of any results that may or may not happen."

Nugent was silent. Had not Helen said something of the kind to him, too, when he had asked her advice on the night of the ball?

"Would it be right, do you think?" he asked doubtfully, after a few minutes of reflection.

"Certainly it would be right."

"But for Dora Torrington? Remember, I am an old friend of hers."

"Be her old friend still—but do not be her slave. You have just confessed to me that you love another woman whom you wished to make your wife; how, then, can you in the same breath talk of marrying Mrs. Torrington?"

"But there might be a duty toward her—it might be a kindness."

"It would be kinder to her to remove yourself entirely out of her way; and it can never be a man's duty, save under most exceptional cases, to marry a woman he does not love."

"I believe you are right; but what do you advise me to do?"

"Write to her to-morrow. Put things in plain words: refuse to see her again."

"But she will not consent. She pretends that I am bound by my honor to remain unmarried for three more years. She has a letter of mine."

"That is all nonsense, Mr. Nugent. If you cannot get rid of the woman in any other way, go abroad at once. She cannot follow you across the seas."

For a minute or two he made no reply, and then he sighed rather wearily.

"I believe you are right," he said, once more. "You always are right, Mrs. Delastair; but it is a miserable lookout for me."

"Because you are spoilt, my dear fellow. You have been made too much at home. Go to the other side of the world, and rough it a little. You speak of this girl, who you say had a story in the past, and who disappointed your expectations. Who are you, and what has your past been, that you should judge her so hardly? That is so like a man. However disreputable his own life has been, he has never any allowance to make for the errors of the woman he honors with his preference."

"She told me a lie," he said gloomily.

"That was very wrong, of course; but are you sure you did not drive her into it? Can you feel certain that there were not excuses to be made for her? I dare say she is dreadfully sorry for it now. I dare say she is very unhappy, and I am sure you are. You will find that

some day you will have to forgive her for that untruth."

"Very likely she would not forgive me for condemning her so readily."

"Very likely not. But you must give her time. You must prove your own sincerity first by clearing your own life of all that is discreditable. I don't consider you will be worthy of any girl, however faulty she may be, until you have done that. You will forgive me for speaking plainly, will you not? I am a plain-spoken woman, you know."

"You are the best and kindest woman on earth, Mrs. Delastair," said Nugent warmly; and then he got up and held out his hand to her. "If you will excuse me I will wish you good night now; I want to go to my own room and think over what you have said quietly. Do you know that you have given me back two things that I thought I had lost entirely—a little self-respect and a little hope?" And then he wished her good night and slipped quietly out of the room.

He was happier that night than he had been for a long time. To begin with, Mrs. Delastair had encouraged and strengthened him—Gilbert was very easily swayed, either for good or for evil—and a thoroughly upright and conscientious influence was never without its corresponding effect upon his mobile nature; and then she had not condemned Helen Dacre hopelessly. She had spoken of her as a good girl; she had made excuses for her fault, and had suggested that she, at any rate, was less blameworthy than himself. All this comforted and cheered him. Perhaps, after all, Helen had been frightened and coerced; perhaps she had been so hard driven that she had sinned, not through deliberation, but through weakness. Now that the first

brunt of his anger was over he began to make excuses for her, to admit that her conduct had not succeeded in destroying his love and longing for her, and to see that, as Mrs. Delastair had told him, the day would probably come when he should be able to forgive her fully and freely.

That very night he wrote his letter to Dora Torrington. He sat up half the night writing it, and he tore up a great many sheets of paper in the doing of it. For it was not an easy letter to write. It is never easy for a man who has once professed to love a lady to back out of these professions and to inform her that he loves her no longer. There is, perhaps, no position on earth which a man feels to be more uncomfortable and untenable. It is true that in this case Gilbert had already paved the way by the most outspoken statements of his change of sentiment; but as Dora had always utterly refused to accept the resignation which he had vainly endeavored to tender to her, he had found himself, after all his efforts, not one whit advanced in the struggle for freedom which he had already made. But now he was resolved that he would indeed be free; and his letter was couched in words that spoke this resolution with almost a brutal plainness. In fact, to make it clear enough, he was obliged to be brutal, and naturally he hated himself for being so. Over and over again, during the course of that dreadful night, his evil angel reminded him of Dora Torrington's devotion to him, of the years she had clung to him, of the fascination she had exercised over him in the early days of their acquaintance; and over and over again he laid down his pen, and said to himself, aloud: "I cannot do it! I cannot be such a brute to her! I have made my fate, and I must continue to endure it!" And it was only

the recollection of Mrs. Delastair's sensible advice, and the secret hope that by following it he might, perhaps, some day live to be loved again by Helen Dacre, which kept him from throwing aside his self-imposed task in hopeless despair.

The morning light was creeping grayly through the chinks in the shutters of his room before that letter was finished and addressed and fastened up; and when at length he flung himself upon his bed, he was thoroughly worn out both in mind and in body.

He soon fell into a deep and dreamless slumber, and when he awoke and saw the letter lying addressed and sealed upon his table, he felt as though the weight of a great trouble had been lifted from his heart. When it was actually posted he was happier still, and enjoyed his shooting that day more thoroughly than he had done since his arrival; for his easy-going nature persuaded itself that all would now be plain sailing. He would be free, free to go where he pleased, to do as he liked, and to begin a new and a better life.

He even found himself day-dreaming about Helen Dacre. A keen recollection of her adorable charms returned to him, making his pulses beat quicker and his hopes rise high. Mrs. Delastair had told him that he would have to forgive her, that she was probably less to blame than he had fancied, and that her sin had not been unpardonable. He would seek her out; he would forgive her. There should be a reconciliation between them, for is not "making it up" the most delightful task in life to two people who love each other? And Gilbert told himself that he would seal his forgiveness upon the sweetest lips in the world. And then—and then! Oh, how could he ever be grateful enough to Mrs. Delastair for making him write that letter? Perhaps,

however, it would have damped Gilbert Nugent's good spirits considerably could he have known that, as far as Helen Dacre was concerned, he had penned that letter at Mrs. Delastair's instigation exactly twenty-four hours too late!

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN the great gloomy mansion in Portman Square there reigned an intense, although curiously suppressed, excitement.

It was in the air: from the lowest cellar to the highest attic, the atmosphere was pervaded with it—it seemed to permeate into every room of the house; and there was not a servant, from the great Mr. Davis down to Sally, the under kitchen girl, who was not full of it.

There was a coming and going all the morning through the front door—bells that rang incessantly, footsteps that hurried constantly across the black-and-white flagstones of the hall, and up the soft carpeted staircase. The noises, though incessant, were not loud. There was a hushed solemnity about it all—almost, it might be said, a shocked solemnity.

The morning tradesmen saw that there was something the matter when they came to the back door upon their rounds, and glanced anxiously up at the windows to see whether, by chance, the blinds were pulled down; but no, the earl was presumably alive, for there were no signs of funereal woe about the outer aspect of the house. Yet strange and unwonted visitors were passing in and out of it, and it was plain that something very unusual was taking place within.

There was, for instance, Mr. Scarsdale, the family lawyer, who dashed up at an early hour to the door in a hansom, and who went away again, after a brief visit, as rapidly as he came, only to return in an hour's time

accompanied by his clerk and a large shiny black leather bag. Then came the doctors, one after the other, and later on both together, and lastly, a visitor who was not often seen within Lord Bainton's door—the vicar of the parish.

All these gentlemen went upstairs on their arrival, and were conducted straight into the earl's sick room, where the door was mysteriously shut upon them.

Meanwhile, in the dressing-room which communicated with Lord Bainton's bed-chamber, some very extraordinary proceedings were taking place. Here might be seen Mrs. Sims, the housekeeper, superintending and directing the operations of a bevy of maid-servants. It was a large room, as large as the bedroom itself, and before long it underwent a complete transformation. After a course of scrubbing and sweeping and dusting, which lasted for the better part of an hour, Mrs. Sims gave orders that all that appertained to the toilet should be removed or hidden from sight. Straightway the washing-stand and its belongings vanished, the large bath was concealed by a high, handsome Japanese screen, and wardrobes, boot cupboards and chests of drawers were so draped and transmogrified by Eastern embroideries that their original shape and purpose become unrecognizable. Then a table covered by a gold and crimson cloth was set up in the centre of the room; and all being now prepared for the last touches, a quantity of beautiful flowers was brought in from the most expensive florist of London, and from them, in spite of the inclemency of the winter's morning, a perfect *parterre* of hothouse flowers and a forest of foliage plants was quickly conveyed into the earl's dressing-room. It was at last a dressing-room no longer. It was a lady's bower—a festal chamber—

or, better simile still, a chapel decorated and adorned for a great and joyful occasion.

All this time, down in the basement, the cook and her assistants were also hard at work. A luncheon was to be ready at two o'clock: a luncheon of such a *recherché* nature, that it should be a veritable triumph of culinary art. This meal was to be served upstairs also, in a little unused room on the same floor as Lord Bainton's bedroom and dressing-room that was on the opposite side of the landing.

"And to think," exclaimed the cook, as she stood up to her eyes in the midst of her saucepans and stewpots, "to think that after all these years and years, his lordship should have only given me four hours' notice to prepare for such an event as this! I call it downright cruel, that I do. How is a decent cook to keep up her credit all in such a hurry as this, I should like to know?"

All this time Helen Dacre sat by herself in her own little room on a higher story of the house. The morning was cold and raw, and Helen, after sending away almost untasted the breakfast which had been brought up to her, sat down shiveringly by the side of the fire. Presently she, too, began to receive visitors, Sir Augustus Rolls being the first person to request an interview with her.

Helen rose slowly to her feet as the eminent physician entered her little sitting-room. She was pale and weary, and her eyes were dull and lustreless. She looked as if she had not slept all night, and, naturally enough, her appearance had suffered considerably. Sir Augustus, as he came in, glanced at her sternly and coldly; and he said to himself as he did so, "She is not even pretty. What on earth can be the attraction?"

He bowed to her coldly, took the chair that she

pushed forward to him, then cleared his throat and looked straight into the fire. What he had to say to her was not either pleasant or easy to say.

"Miss Dacre," he began awkwardly enough, "I have requested you to grant me this interview because I conceive it to be my duty to speak to you most seriously." He waited for a minute, and then Helen said slowly and inquiringly "Yes?"

There was another pause.

"You will, I dare say, understand the unbounded surprise—the absolute shock, I may say—with which I received at a very early hour this morning the intimation of Lord Bainton's most extraordinary intentions."

Again Helen said only "Yes," with a little accent of inquiry, nothing more.

"Of course," continued Sir Augustus, lashing himself up into a little burst of indignation, "no conscientious or honorable physician could receive such a communication concerning a patient in whom he is interested without being deeply concerned and distressed."

As this remark did not seem to require an answer, Helen said nothing.

She was standing by the mantelpiece, with her elbow leaning upon it and her face upon her hand. She looked very, very tired, and there was something almost apathetic in the droop of her slender figure and in the downward curves of her sad mouth. Sir Augustus, looking up at her sharply, wondered for a moment whether she had ever heard what he was saying to her. He spoke even a little more brusquely than before in consequence.

"Of course, Miss Dacre, you are a perfect stranger to me, and perhaps you may think that my conduct

savors of interference; but I have my noble patient to think of, and whatever may be your motives in this matter, I think it is my duty to him to warn you most solemnly against what you are about to do."

Helen lifted her head slowly and looked at him.

"Why?" she asked wonderingly, whilst a slow, red flush crept over her face.

"Because Lord Bainton is the victim of a mortal complaint from which it is quite impossible that he can ever entirely recover."

She was startled—she clasped her hands together with a sudden gesture of dismay.

"Oh, no!" she cried with agitation; "do not say so—it cannot be true!"

"It *is* true. I do not say that he will die to-day or to-morrow, or even this year; but his life cannot be protracted for very long, even with the greatest care. Now that I have spoken to you plainly," he continued, rising from his chair, "I trust you will pause before it is too late, and that you will refuse to consent to take a step which can bring to you nothing but trouble and sorrow."

"Oh, but you mistake me entirely. What you tell me can only make me tenfold more determined to do what I can for him as long as his life is spared."

Sir Augustus shrugged his shoulders, and took up his hat from the table. It was evident that he did not believe her.

"It is not for me to be the judge of your motives, young lady. If you have no friends to advise you better, I am sorry for you. In any case, I have relieved my own conscience, and you can never say that I neglected to warn you. I have the honor to wish you good morning."

And then he bowed to her again, very coldly and stiffly, and left the room.

"A heartless, mercenary creature!" he said to himself, as he went quickly downstairs. "Ready to sell herself to a dying man and turn herself into a sick nurse for the sake of his title! Such hardened worldliness in one so young is positively disgusting."

It never entered into Helen's mind to imagine that any one would judge her so hardly or attribute such base motives to her. After the doctor was gone, she wondered a little why he had been so harsh and rough to her, and why he had told her such a dreadful thing about her guardian so brutally and unsympathetically; and she shed a few tears over what he had said.

"I suppose," she thought to herself, in extenuation of his unkindness, "that the constant sight of so much suffering hardens a doctor's heart in time. They can't be expected, I dare say, to feel for individual sorrows. How could he suppose that I should be so selfish as to draw back now just because Lord Bainton may not live very long?"

Presently, however, Helen received another visitor, who also said to her some strange and not altogether pleasant things.

This was Mr. Scarsdale, the solicitor. He was a white-headed little gentleman, with spectacles on his nose, and a perpetual smile on his thin lips that imparted a certain amount of nervous amiability to his manner. He came in smiling and bowing, and rubbing his hands together in quite a friendly fashion, and Helen thought at first that she liked him much better than Sir Augustus Rolls. But before his visit was over she had reason to change her mind. Mr. Scarsdale began by expressing himself greatly delighted at making her acquaintance.

He called her his "dear young lady," said he hoped they should be the best of friends, and then sat down and pulled off his gloves, smiling at her quite affectionately.

"You know, my dear Miss Dacre," he then remarked, quite unexpectedly, "you know I can't let you do this, my dear. You mustn't think of it! No, don't interrupt me," as Helen, in extreme surprise, was about to answer him, "you must just listen to me. Of course, you are young, and you don't understand these things—how should you?—but there are family considerations, my dear Miss Dacre, family considerations of the—very—highest importance," and Mr. Scarsdale brought out his words one by one with a little jerk, as though to impress them upon her mind.

"I do not understand," began Helen.

"No, no, of course not! That is just what I say. How should a young and charming young lady be expected to understand? But—you take my word for it, my dear—it mustn't be done!—it mustn't be done!" and Mr. Scarsdale shook a long and bony forefinger playfully at her.

"*What* mustn't be done, Mr. Scarsdale?" she asked, in bewilderment.

"Ha! ha! As if you did not know! Ah, these secrets can't be kept from the lawyer, you know. And when settlements are to be drawn up on a magnificent scale, and wills are to be altered—"

"Settlements? Wills?" repeated Helen, turning upon him a pale and startled face.

"And natural heirs set aside, all for the sake of one charming young lady. Why, then, I say it mustn't be done; it mustn't, indeed."

An inkling of his meaning broke suddenly into her

puzzled mind, and with it a great dismay. She sprang from her chair and confronted him breathlessly.

"Explain to me at once, Mr. Scarsdale, and in as few words as possible, what you mean to imply. Has Lord Bainton, in consequence of his intentions with regard to me, altered his will? Is that what you mean to say?"

"He has directed me to prepare a fresh will—an unjust will, Miss Dacre. Of course, my dear young lady, I do not object to settlement in your favor in reason—in reason; but when it comes to sweeping measures—to cutting out altogether the name of his nephew and heir, young Mr. Greyson—"

"*Ted!*" gasped Helen, below her breath. Ted, who had been good to her—who had taught her to ride—who had stood by her! Could she ever forget his honest, ugly face, or bring evil upon the head of the boyish friend to whom she had sworn a sister's affection?

"That will do, Mr. Scarsdale," she said, suddenly turning toward him. "I am much obliged to you for telling me. You need say no more."

"And you will prevent Lord Bainton from carrying out this intention of his?"

"I shall do what I think right," she answered, with some dignity. "Please leave me." And Mr. Scarsdale went.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT Helen Dacre had done or had not done was not known either to Sir Augustus Rolls or to Mr. Scarsdale when, rather more than two hours later, they stood side by side in the profusely decorated dressing-room opening out of Lord Bainton's bedchamber as witnesses to the strangest marriage ceremony which it had ever fallen to the lot of either of them to be present at.

The clergyman in his canonical robes, with a prayer-book in his hand, stood on the further side of the table; the bride in a little dark cloth winter gown, and bearing an enormous bouquet of hothouse flowers in her trembling hands, stood before him. The servants had filed in, in a long procession, and stood grouped about the door, and from the open door of the bedroom beyond a wheeled bath-chair was being slowly pushed forward by his lordship's valet, whilst Mr. Wright, his lordship's doctor, walked by the side of it, steadying it with his hands as it advanced toward the impromptu altar.

The earl had been carefully dressed and shaved for the occasion; but, although a flush of excitement lit up his thin face, the ravages which illness had made in his appearance were very dreadfully apparent. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes cavernous, and his lower jaw seemed to have fallen a little away. He looked a good ten years older than his real age. Even the brilliant, flowery-patterned satin dressing-gown in which he had been wrapped, the spotless collar and cuffs, the glittering diamond horseshoe pin in his satin scarf, only

served to make his decrepitude and infirmity more conspicuous and more terrible. Helen, glancing at him as he was brought in, could not repress an involuntary shudder. She turned deadly pale; for a moment she tottered a little, and had to put out her hand to the edge of the table to steady herself, and all the while she felt that Sir Augustus's cold and disapproving eyes were fixed upon her—with a scorn which almost amounted to disgust.

It seemed to her for a moment that she could not go through with it—that she could not possibly bring herself to sacrifice her youth and her happiness to this old man, who lay already, as the physician had told her, under the awful doom of a mortal disease.

But in Helen's mind there was only one alternative. A stronger nature than hers might have known how to strike clear from what in her eyes constituted a hopeless predicament.

A woman with a greater knowledge of the world, coupled with a firmer self-reliance, would have seen her way to a better and wiser way out of her troubles. She would have said to herself that having that all-compelling power—the power of money—in her possession, it was possible to her to do all things—to cut the Gordian knot of her difficulties; to face life alone and unaided; to carve out a new career for herself; to free herself from the meshes in which she was now entangled, and in short to make herself independent both of the schemes and the claims of those about her.

But such vigorous measures did not lie within the scope of Helen's yielding and somewhat timid nature. Courage with her was but an evanescent quality, not to be reckoned upon in an emergency. She had never been taught to be independent of others, and it did not

occur to her that it would be possible to stand alone. She was of that essentially loving and clinging nature of which the tenderest wives and mothers are made, but which does not count for much in the composition of a heroine. She longed for affection—for the security of a home, and for the protection of some one whose right and whose pleasure it would be to shelter her safely against the coldness and the cruelty she had met with in the world.

A natural and physical repulsion indeed made her tremble at this supreme crisis of her fate. When she looked at the bridegroom into whose arms fate seemed to have driven her, it was the shrinking of youth from age—the repugnance of May for December. Yet almost immediately she overcame these sensations, for she was sincerely attached to Lord Bainton. Moreover she reminded herself of the alternative. She thought about Frederick Warne and his repulsive priggishness, of his claims, of his threats to enforce them, and of her own powerlessness to repel him. When she remembered, on the other hand, a certain interview, not an hour since, with this other man who wished to make her his wife, his kindness, his affection, his ready acquiescence in all her requests, and his deep and unfeigned gratitude to her for her compliance with his wishes, her courage came back once more.

“After all,” she said to herself, “I have no one else on earth but him. He loves me, and I am necessary to his happiness. No one else wants me, or cares whether I live or die; and if these men, the doctors and the lawyer, do believe me to be base and mercenary, what does that matter since he knows better, and we understand one another?”

When the bath-chair reached her side Lord Bainton

stretched out to her a withered, claw-like hand that seemed to be only half its normal size. She grasped it firmly and encouragingly in hers, and then, emboldened by this signal of love and confidence, she raised her head and met the physician's eyes defiantly and bravely.

"You do not understand," those eyes seemed to say. "You are suspicious and cruel."

But to Sir Augustus Rolls they failed to convey their message, and he only said to himself, "Brazen-faced girl! She glories in her shameful position."

The clergyman, who for certain was no more in sympathy with her than the rest, coughed dryly behind his fingers as a sign that he was ready, and the service began.

In a very few seconds—for, in consideration of the bridegroom's strength, the formulary was as much abridged as possible—John Edward Ravenstroke had consented to take Helen Grace to his wedded wife, and almost inaudibly Helen Grace had in turn assented to take John Edward Ravenstroke to her wedded husband. Mr. Wright, who had stationed himself by her side, had given the bride away, and with the gold ring upon her finger they both once more in turn plighted their marriage vows.

"Till death us do part." The words rang out ominously and with an unusual solemnity into the silence of the room, and there was not one of those present who did not say in his heart—

"And how soon will not that be!"

Perhaps the earl himself was the only one to whom the message of Death, inscribed so plainly to the eyes of the lookers-on upon his altered face, did not come home with an awful conviction. In him alone for one blissful moment joy and content absorbed all fears for

the future—all terrors of that dread unknown that already had knocked at his door.

As he held out his hands to his young wife upon the closing words of the service, and drew her face fondly down toward his own, he cried, joyfully—

“Now I shall get well again! Now I shall soon be strong! Thanks to you, my brave and noble darling! Scarsdale,” turning suddenly to the lawyer, “did you see about those diamonds from the bank? Are they here? Bring them at once—they are my wedding present to you, my love—give them to me quickly, that I may clasp them myself round Lady Bainton’s neck.”

Helen turned a little paler still at the sound of her new name. Scarsdale was handing two large leather jewel-cases to the earl from a locked bag he had brought with him. Helen knelt down by the old man’s side, as with trembling hands he threw a magnificent necklace of diamonds about her neck, and placed a tiara in the shape of a coronet upon her dark hair.

“There! Is she not handsome? My bride, my queen!” he exclaimed, in delight. “Now let us get to lunch. Oh, yes, Rolls, I am going to lunch with you, of course. Don’t come preaching at me, if you please, on my wedding-day. Mr. Venner,”—to the clergyman who had married them—“give Lady Bainton your arm, and conduct her into the adjoining room. Here, Wright, you walk by me. And you, gentlemen”—turning to the others—“please to follow us. You must all be hungry, I am sure, and luncheon, I see, is quite ready.”

The servants had flung open the doors between the two rooms, and stood in a line on either side, as the vicar, with Helen, all in the glitter of her diamonds—that looked strangely weird and out of place upon her dark stuff gown, and in the cold light of the winter

day—passed out of one door and across to the other, where the luncheon lay spread upon the table.

Just, however, as she reached the door of the other room there was a scream from one of the maids and a sudden rush behind her. She turned quickly round, just in time to see Lord Bainton falling back heavily in his chair, and the doctors hurrying to his assistance. With a cry she flew back again. The servants were running along the passage; Sir Augustus was issuing authoritative orders; the wheeled chair was shot back into the bedroom behind.

“Go away, Lady Bainton,” said Sir Augustus, pushing her roughly back; “you can do no good here—stand back.”

“I will not. I have a right to be here—it is my place. Oh, my God! is he dead?”

For a moment it seemed indeed as though he were.

He lay back perfectly lifeless, with closed eyes, and his face was of an ashen grayness.

The doctors applied restoratives. Helen kept her place in holding one of the inanimate hands and chafing it between her own, that were almost as cold and as numb.

Sir Augustus did not tell her again to go away. Probably, even at this moment of painful anxiety, he had time to recognize the justice of her refusal, and to see that he had no right to banish a wife from her husband's side.

Presently he looked up at her across the lifeless man; his hand was upon his heart.

“He is not dead,” he said to her, in a low voice, and with more deference than he had yet shown to her; “his heart is beating again. It is one of the attacks he has had before—he will come to presently. Everything

depends upon keeping him quiet. If you will go in to your lunch, Lady Bainton, I will come to you as soon as I can leave him, and tell you how he is."

She obeyed him without a word. Mr. Scarsdale and Mr. Venner accompanied her. The servants made way for her to pass in awe-struck silence. The sick room was cleared of all but the doctors and necessary attendants, and the door was closed. Helen moved mechanically to the head of the table and sank down into a chair. As she did so she caught a passing glimpse of herself in the long mirror between the windows. The sight of her own pale and terrified face—her head still crowned with the tiara, her throat still encircled with the festooned clusters of priceless gems—struck a chill shock of horror through her heart. The mockery of it all—of her own appearance, and of the table before her laid out as for a feast, all decked with shining silver and glass, and crowded with dainty dishes that no one was there to eat; with masses of hot-house flowers lying in long garlands among them; gorgeous purple and gold orchids, waxen-white stephanotis, sprays and delicate maidenhair fronds, with their tender greenery, all became to her all at once, no longer the emblems of a wedding feast, but of a tragedy—a tragedy of which she herself was the centre, the heroine. With a low cry of pain she put up her shaking hands to unclasp the jewels from her throat and hair.

"Help me, help me!" she cried piteously, turning to the clergyman who stood by her side, whilst her trembling fingers struggled vainly with the clasps and fastenings of her ill-fated bridal gifts. "Please—please help me to take them off. He is not here to see me, and I cannot wear them any longer. They hurt me so. Oh! they hurt me."

Mr. Venner—although he, like the rest, believed that she had sold herself from the basest of motives to a dying man—could not in common humanity refuse her his assistance, nor could he refrain as he did so from speaking a few kindly commonplaces. He murmured some not very coherent sentences about the earl's probable recovery and her own need of strength and patience.

There was little enough in the words. In his own ears, indeed, they sounded cold and unsympathetic, for the circumstances were exceptional, and the good man hardly knew what to say; but the poor child was so utterly lonely and wretched that, with an unexpected gush of gratitude which considerably surprised him, she turned to him impulsively, and placed her small, ice-cold hands in his.

“Oh, thank you—thank you!” she exclaimed brokenly. “How kind, how good you are to me!” And then, covering her face with her hands, she burst into a passion of helpless tears.

It seemed to her, indeed, as if life could never hold again so terrible an hour as this.

Alas! the day had more sorrowful things yet still in store for her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. VENNER, who in truth had only spoken because he had thought himself compelled to do so, who was in no way conscious of having shown any kindness or goodness toward Helen, was suddenly touched. Her weakness, her tears, and her little child-like appeal for help moved him strangely.

Mr. Venner had daughters of his own. One of them, not much older than this unhappy girl, had been married only two years ago. He remembered her wedding as if it had been only yesterday.

The crowded rooms; the happy faces; the smiles and the merry laughter; the good wishes of friends and relations, and all the heartfelt blessings and congratulations which had been showered upon the radiant bride and her proud young husband, on that day of all the days of a woman's life—her marriage morning.

And this bride—with her white and woebegone face, tearing the jewels from her hair and neck, with no mother to smile upon her, no father to bless, no crowd of friends to press about her, and wish her joy—this bride was all alone among strangers, while her new-made husband lay half-dead in an adjoining room.

What a horrible contrast it was to that other marriage scene!

In silence he helped her to unfasten her jewels, and the shining stones slipped down in a heap with a little rustling clatter on the table between them.

Lady Bainton never wore the family diamonds again.

"You ought to have something to eat," said Mr. Venner kindly. "What is the use of giving way? You will want all your strength."

She sat down to the table. "You are quite right. I will eat and drink. Perhaps if I am strong and brave I shall be allowed to help presently to nurse him."

They gave her some wine, and put some food upon her plate. The others sat down, too, and for a few minutes there was a little pretence made on all sides. Probably neither Venner nor Scarsdale had much appetite, but they ate to encourage Helen, and she swallowed a few mouthfuls and gulped down the sherry in her glass in order to please and satisfy them.

The refreshment, however, undoubtedly revived and restored her, for she had been almost faint from all the varied emotions of the morning.

A little color stole back into her pale face, and she found herself better able to control the tears which had for a moment threatened to become hysterical.

Presently Sir Augustus came in to report that the earl was conscious and decidedly better.

Helen sprang up eagerly and begged to be allowed to be of use; but he told her that she must, on no account, go into the room. It was essential that the patient should be kept quiet and free from agitation.

"I have given him a draught which I hope will give him some sleep. Mrs. Hogan, the nurse, is a very capable person, and I have given her full directions. Nobody else need go into the room. Mr. Wright is gone now, but he will return in about an hour's time, and I will look in again this evening. If I should be required before then the nurse knows where to telegraph. Good evening, Lady Bainton."

And with a bow the great man hurried away.

The other two gentlemen rose almost immediately to take their departure. The clergyman wished her good-by with kind and pitying eyes. "If you should want a friend," he said, as he held her hand—"it may perhaps be presumption on my part, Lady Bainton, to suppose that you stand in need of friends—"

"Oh, indeed," she interrupted quickly, "I do need friends. I have not one in the whole world, save Lord Bainton."

"Is that so? Then count on me, my dear young lady, if there is anything that I can do for you. Here is my card; send for me if you want me at any hour of the day or night. I will come at once."

He pressed her hand once more, and left her, and as he went out of the house Mr. Venner said to himself as he was walking rapidly away through Portman Square toward his own house: "After all, I was mistaken. That woman is not what I supposed her to be. She is neither base nor mercenary. She is only unhappy. She has had a history. There is more in the story of that marriage than is to be seen on the surface of it."

And all day long he was haunted by memories of those pathetic gray eyes, and by the vision of that pale woman tearing off her shining diamonds with a sort of panic of despair.

After he was gone, Mr. Scarsdale, too, rose to take leave of her.

With a little deprecatory cough and averted eyes, he said—

"You are perhaps aware, Lady Bainton, that the earl signed his new will this morning in my presence?"

Helen bent her head in assent.

"Perhaps I should mention that that will is in my possession. I do not approve of it—it is in my opinion

an iniquitous will—but since my remonstrances to you have had apparently no effect—”

“Do you not think that it is singularly bad taste on your part, Mr. Scarsdale, to discuss this subject in my presence?” said Helen, moving away coldly from him.

“My dear lady, business is business! and alas! in the midst of life we are in death! When Lord Bainton recovers himself sufficiently, I wish to urge upon you the duty of suggesting a modification of this most unfair disposition of his property, and of sending for me without delay to put things upon a more equitable basis.”

Helen smiled a little scornfully. The detestable motives with which this conventionally-minded little lawyer accredited her would almost have amused her, had she been in a mood to be amused.

Perhaps he did not know that she had money—more than enough—of her own. Certainly he did not know how every day that she lived she realized more and more how little happiness her money had brought to her, and how utterly its false and transient promises had failed her. Why should this man imagine that she wanted Lord Bainton’s fortune? What had she ever done to deserve such a cruel suspicion?

Yet she could not explain herself to him; neither would she condescend to make a certain revelation to him of recent events which would place her in a totally different light in his eyes. She was too proud to do that, and, moreover, her tongue was sealed. She remained silent.

“Your husband is very ill, Lady Bainton,” said Mr. Scarsdale again, after a brief pause. “It is my duty to tell you that if he were to die without having

repaired the wrong he has done to his sister and his nephew, I should most decidedly advise Lady Camilla Greyson to dispute the will on the score of undue influence."

"*My influence?*" inquired Helen, turning round upon him sharply, with a heightened color.

Mr. Scarsdale bowed. "Certainly; I mean your influence, madam," rejoined the lawyer, also with some show of temper, "exerted upon a man so weakened and reduced by illness as to be physically in an unfit condition to resist the unscrupulous plans of a scheming woman."

Then Helen lost her temper in downright earnest. She spoke only one word, but that word was spoken with an unmistakable energy, and accompanied by a gesture as decided as it was swift.

She lifted her arm straight from the shoulder and pointed to the door.

"Go!" she said, with flashing eyes and shortened breath. And Mr. Scarsdale, with a small and evil smile, obeyed her and went.

Directly she was alone Helen flew across the passage to the door of her husband's room. Stooping down till her ear was on a level with the keyhole, she listened breathlessly for a few moments at the door. There was not a sound to be heard within; indeed, the loud beats of her own heart almost prevented her from hearing anything else.

After a few seconds she turned the handle of the door as noiselessly as possible, and crept softly into the darkened room.

Mrs. Hogan, the nurse, who sat at the foot of the bed, rose with an outstretched hand to bar her entrance, but on seeing who she was a natural feeling prompted

her to withdraw her opposition. She made a sign to her to come forward quietly.

"My lord is better, my lady," she whispered in her ear. "I think he is dozing."

Helen went quickly to a heavy oaken bureau which stood in a corner of the room, opened a side drawer and took out of it a folded paper; then taking a pen and a small ink-bottle in her other hand, she said in a hurried whisper to the nurse, who had watched her proceedings suspiciously, "It is necessary that Lord Bainton should sign this paper. You must rouse him up."

"Oh, my lady! I would not do such a thing for worlds. What! awake him now, just as he has taken a composing draught and is dozing off! Why, a sleep may be his salvation. I could not do it—indeed, I could not!"

"Look here, nurse; I tell you, you *must*," answered Helen firmly. And then she took her arm and drew her away behind the screen that sheltered the door, so that nothing she said could possibly reach the sick man's ears. "Nurse, you know as well as the doctors do, that Lord Bainton has an incurable disease."

"Oh, my lady, there is always hope whilst there is life."

"Never mind. You know that in all human probability Lord Bainton cannot live many months—more than that, that he might very possibly die at any moment. Is it not so?"

"I sadly fear. I should not like to distress you by saying so, my lady."

"This is not a time to think of my distress," answered Helen, whose face was strangely flushed and excited. "It is a question of a great wrong to be redressed; a

mistake to be set right—something which, by signing his name to this paper which I wrote at his dictation this morning—Lord Bainton will do an action of justice. If he dies without signing it the evil will be irreparable. I am determined that he shall sign it. Now, do you understand me? There is no time like the present. Very soon Mr. Wright will come back, and he will drive me out of the room. His lordship is calm. The little doze he is having will have refreshed him. Who can tell how long this gleam of improvement may last, or how soon he may become unconscious once more? Now go and rouse him up fully. I am his wife; I have a right to give you orders. If you do not obey me I shall discharge you.”

Mrs. Hogan was unable to withstand so direct an appeal to her self-interest. She protested feebly, it is true; but she went to the bedside, all the same, to execute Lady Bainton's orders, and lifted the invalid a little upon his pillow. Lord Bainton opened his eyes, and as they fell upon his wife a smile of pleasure overspread his face.

“Ah, Helen!” he murmured, holding out his feeble hands to her. “This is a sad wedding day for you, my dear. But I am better—much better. I shall cheat the doctors yet.”

Then Mrs. Hogan, at a sign from her, retired into the further room.

“You are feeling really better, dear Lord Bainton?” asked Helen, as she bent over him.

“Yes, dear; much better.”

“Then I want you just to sign the paper that I wrote out,” and she placed the pen in his fingers. “Please try; it will not take long to write your name. See, I will hold the paper for you and guide your hand.”

"Oh, child, there is no hurry. Why do you care so much about it?"

"You have promised me, remember."

"Yes, a foolish promise. Let it be—let it be. She deserves nothing at my hands—she treated you badly. Let her suffer her punishment."

"Do not let us argue it all over again," said Helen gently. "You know that I can never be happy unless it is done—never."

He took the pen in his hand, holding it doubtfully for a moment, then he glanced up at her suddenly.

"You have made it clear about the six months?"

"Quite clear. It is exactly as you said it should be."

"And you will keep your promise to me? For six months from the day of my death you will not speak of this second will of mine to a living creature. You will allow the will which Scarsdale has, and by which I have left you everything, to come into operation, and you will make no sign. Swear it to me once more."

"I swear it to you."

"Very well, then, it shall be as you wish. But remember that I consider it foolish and Quixotic of you to insist upon it, and but for that redeeming clause about the six months, which will at any rate give my sister some sort of retribution for her cruelty, I would not sign it at all." He lifted his hand with difficulty and Helen guided it into the right place.

It was at this precise moment that Mrs. Hogan, devoured by that curiosity which has been the curse of her sex since the foundation of the world, crept back softly through the open doorway from the dressing-room, and stood listening behind the tall screen.

"Remember," said Lord Bainton, in a distinct voice, "It is you that makes me do this. I have no wish to

alter things. I am signing this codicil only under strong pressure."

Then there was a second of silence, and immediately Lady Bainton called out—

"Nurse!" Mrs. Hogan came quickly forward, and Helen desired her to summon a housemaid, so that they might both sign their names as witnesses to the document.

When this was done Helen sealed up the paper in a long envelope, and carried it away safely to her own room upstairs.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was evening. The doctors had come and gone for the last time that day, and had pronounced their patient to be decidedly better. The prescribed sleeping draught had been administered to him, and he had sunk into a heavy slumber. The house was in profound silence, and Helen sat alone by the fireside in the little morning-room, half-way up the stairs, which she preferred to any of the great handsome reception-rooms downstairs, in their ghostly loneliness that oppressed her by their size and their emptiness.

It was, at any rate, cosy enough in this little square room with the red curtains and the warm fire glow, the table with the shaded lamp upon it drawn up before the hearthrug, and the comfortable arm-chair in the chimney corner.

Mrs. Sims had brought her a little repast here upon a tray, for Davis had asked to go out, and she almost preferred to be waited upon by the motherly house-keeper. The meal did not occupy her long, and after it was over, and the tray had been removed, she found herself a book and drew the big arm-chair close in to the fire and pretended to read.

It was a poor pretence after all, for her brain was busy with teeming thoughts. What she had done—now that it was done beyond recall—made her deeply anxious. On the whole she did not regret her marriage; it had at any rate given her a home and a right to remain where she was. It had given her, too, a position and

security from insult. She was safe now in Lord Bainton's house; his name was a shield and a protection to her, and, ill though he was, not one of her enemies could reach her or molest her so long as she remained under his roof. And she had made him happy, too. It had been a sick man's fancy to make her his wife, and in doing so she had made him the only return for his goodness that was in her power. From the bottom of her heart she prayed that his life might be prolonged, if only for a few months, so that she might prove her gratitude to him by her loving devotion. That he should be doomed to die made her very sad indeed; but, sad as it was, the thought that it might lie in her power to render his last days on earth happy, filled her with a deep sense of thankfulness.

As she sat on by herself, reviewing her position, and turning all these thoughts over in her mind, the distant ringing of the door-bell hardly caught her ears, and did not suffice to arrest her attention. It was only when the door opened behind her, and a timid voice began, "If you please, my lady," she realized that the bell meant something or some one had come to break in upon her solitude. A housemaid stood in the doorway.

"If you please, my lady, there is a gentleman who has called to see you."

"A gentleman? Did you open the door to him, Jane?"

"Yes, my lady. Mr. Davis being out, James has just run across to the post for a minute, and Mr. Williams, the valet, has gone to the chemist for something, as the nurse sent down to say she required. So there was no one but me to answer the door."

"Never mind about that," said Helen, cutting short these elaborate apologies for the defaulting men-

servants. "Who is the gentleman? and have you admitted him?"

"He would not give his name, my lady, and he is waiting in the hall."

"You should have told him that Lord Bainton is very ill, and that visitors are not received at present."

"So I did, my lady, but he wouldn't take no denial, and just stepped past me into the hall and said, 'Go and tell Miss Dacre that a gentleman desires to see her on a matter of great importance.' He did not know, in course, that you was not Miss Dacre any longer, and I was going on to explain it to him, but he stopped me quite angry-like and says he, 'Go at once and tell her, girl, and don't stop here talking.'"

Jane did not think it necessary to add that the gentleman had given her a sovereign to expedite matters.

Helen rose slowly to her feet. Without a doubt it was Frederick Warne come back once more to persecute her with his odious pretensions. For the second time he had forced his way into Lord Bainton's house, and had insisted upon seeing her in spite of the efforts of the servants to refuse him admittance.

Well, she feared him no longer. He was powerless now. His threats and his entreaties were alike defeated. He could not bring his old aunt to taunt her with the unseemliness of her position, or to flout her for immodesty if she refused to go back with her to the shelter of Aberdare House; neither could he hold over her head those vague terrors of scandal and of public exposure by which, in hinting at an action of breach of promise, he had hitherto been able to strike absolute terror into her mind.

A sense of triumph came to her. She had outwitted him; she could turn the tables on him now, for was she

not an honored wife in her husband's house? How small and mean and humble he would feel when he learnt the truth from her lips!

Her courage rose; there was a bright spot of color burning in either cheek, and her eyes glittered with a certain eagerness as she bade the girl go and bring the gentleman up.

"I will see him here," she said, with decision. "Ask him to come upstairs." And then she waited, standing with her back to the fireplace and her face toward the door.

Two or three minutes passed away. Helen, in her impatience for the triumph she anticipated, found them long. She wanted to repay him for all the annoyance he had caused her—to see his self-satisfied face change and fall as she made known her great news to him. How slowly the minutes went by!

The clock ticked behind her; the coals fell in a little crash, and the flames leapt merrily up the chimney. Then at last the door was thrown widely open, and a man came in out of the gloom of the dimly lit staircase and landing.

Two paces into the room; and by the time the retreating Jane had closed the door again softly, the visitor stood close before her full in the warm light of the lamp and the fire.

Helen uttered a smothered cry, and fell back, clutching at the mantelshelf behind her. All the bright color vanished from her face, leaving her deadly pale, and a cold faintness almost overpowered her; for the man who stood before her was not Frederick Warne. It was Gilbert Nugent!

Nugent, who had parted with her in anger because she had told him a lie—who had sworn never to see her

again—who had left her to despair and utter hopelessness, and whose harshness and cruelty had driven her into making a wreck of her whole life!

“Oh, no, no!” she wailed incoherently at the sight of him, and then she cowered and bent her head, hiding her face in her hands that she might not see him, whom she still loved so dearly, and so hopelessly.

“I have frightened you, Helen! I have come too suddenly. Oh! forgive me, my dear one, and look up—look up—let me see your sweet face once more—let me hear you say that you will forgive me!”

He came eagerly forward with outstretched hands; he took her shrinking, trembling form into his arms, and would have drawn her to his heart, but she pushed him roughly away.

“Oh, you must go!—you must go!” she gasped. “You must not stay here—oh!—I never thought that it could be you. Go—I entreat you!”

Her face was white and drawn, and there was positive anguish in her dark eyes as they looked up into his, pushing him away from her as she did so with her feeble little hands. But Nugent had come to her full of new hopes and resolutions, and he was not to be so easily repulsed.

“Why am I to go, pray? Is your heart so hard against me, darling, that you cannot forgive me—though I come to you a penitent and deeply humble man? I am here to own myself in the wrong—to tell you that I do not believe you to have been so much to blame as I was; for if you lied to me I, on my part, was—God knows—utterly unworthy of you. But now I have thought it all over. I have realized the error of my life, and I have resolved to err no more. I have written to her—to Dora. I have freed myself, and to free my-

self still more effectually I am going abroad at once for three whole years—so that in the days to come no shadow of my disgrace may rest for a moment on the pure and stainless heart of her I still am bold enough to hope some day to win.

“But before I go I have come to bid you farewell, and to plead, not only for your forgiveness, but for that love which you have told me I have been so fortunate as once to win. Will you forgive me, dearest? Will you give me back your love, even as I give you back my faith and trust? And you are young: dare I ask you to wait for me till I come home again—to wait here, in your guardian’s house and under his care, till time and absence have purified my life and rendered me less unfit to plead for the gift of your hand from him?”

She heard him to the end. She was powerless to stem the current of his eager words. She could not speak. A horrible numbness overpowered her, mentally and physically. It was as though death itself had laid its icy grip upon her. At last a long, miserable moan broke from her white lips, and, eluding the grasp of his eager hands, she slipped down upon the chair behind her, and shivered from head to foot.

In an instant he was kneeling by her side, kissing her cold hands with all a lover’s intensity. “What is it, my own—my love? Why do you turn from me? And why are you so cold and so trembling? Is it possible that in so short a time you have ceased to care for me; or have I sinned past forgiveness, and can you not forget my offence? But you shall prove me—put me to the test. You shall see how faithfully I will love you, how patiently I will wait for you.”

“Oh, hush, hush!” she cried brokenly and wildly.

"You must not speak to me like that. Oh! if you knew—if you only knew!

For the first time a little uneasiness crept into his mind.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at her curiously. "What is there to know; and why do you turn away from me?"

For she had twisted herself away into the corner of the deep arm-chair, hiding her face in the satin cushions, so that he could only see the dark head, with its masses of soft, disordered hair.

"I don't quite understand, Helen, darling. Are you in any fresh trouble, or are you angry with me—too angry to speak to me? Or—but the servant told me that Lord Bainton was very ill. I hardly heard her; but, of course, that is your trouble. You are very anxious and unhappy about the poor old man."

And then, driven desperate by these guesses and surmises, Helen sat up, pushed the thick locks back from her damp brow, and faced the man she loved so deeply, but whom by her own deeds she had lost forever—faced him with such an agony of despair in her haggard eyes and white, drawn lips as told him at last that here indeed was some terrible trouble—something quite above and beyond anything he could possibly divine or imagine.

"I must tell you the truth," she gasped. "I cannot let you go in ignorance. I have done what will make you hate and despise me, what will debase and degrade me forever in your eyes, and will show you how bad and vile and wicked a thing I must be."

"Oh, Helen! for God's sake do not say such terrible things! How can you be ever degraded or debased to

me? Are you not my dream, my ideal, my pearl amongst women—my own dear, dear love?”

“No; I am not your love. I never can be your love. I am nothing to you—nothing; for I was married to Lord Bainton this morning.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

DORA TORRINGTON sat alone on the corner of her bed in her own room at Old Park.

An open letter which the morning's post had brought to her was in her hand. She was not looking at it; her eyes were fixed blankly upon the window, and upon the dreary winter landscape without. But she saw nothing of it.

What she saw was only the wreck and ruin of a mis-spent and evil life—only the husks of a wasted existence, and the bitter fruits of ill-regulated and unlawful desires.

It was all over now! Her victim had escaped her, her dupe had shaken himself free; he was going away, he said—away to New Zealand.

Fool that she had been not to see that some day his manhood would awaken, and his independence assert itself! At any moment in all these long years he might have broken loose in this way, might have made a stand in this fashion, against which she could do nothing. For she could not go to New Zealand after him; she had not the effrontery; and, worse than that, she had not the money.

That was where the shoe chiefly pinched her. She was poor—she was hampered by debts—she was worried out of her life by creditors. And yet she would have counted it all for nothing if she could have kept Gilbert Nugent.

“Heaven knows I was not mercenary in my love for

him," said the wretched woman to herself, as the miserable tears coursed one by one down her cheeks, making suspicious little streaks on their pink surface. "I loved him for himself. I wanted him for my own, just because I have never seen anybody like him; nobody half so handsome, so popular—so clever. I have put up with all his fancies and whims, his flirtations with other women, his bad tempers to myself. And after all these years, this is the reward I get—he takes himself off to the other side of the world, and says he means to stop there till the three years of our compact are over, and he is free to come home and marry some one else. Well, it might be worse, for he might have married that wretched girl Helen Dacre. That would have driven me mad; but, thank goodness, I was successful in putting him out of conceit with *her*! My little plan answered perfectly—he will never have anything to say to her again. If I lose him, she at least does not gain him; that is something to be thankful for, anyhow."

At this moment she heard Lady Camilla's voice calling to her loudly.

"Dora, Dora! where are you? Come here at once, I want you."

Dora dashed the bitter tears out of her hard, steely-blue eyes as she rose quickly to respond to the summons.

Slipping the letter into her pocket, she went hastily out of her room, and met Lady Camilla rushing upstairs with such consternation and dismay in her face as made her instantly perceive that something very serious was the matter.

"What is it, Camilla? What has happened?" she cried, running toward her. Naturally her thoughts flew to Ted. Had he met with an accident at Eton?

Been stamped upon at football, or had his eye knocked out by a fives ball? Surely nothing short of this could account for Lady Camilla's terrible appearance! She was purple in the face, her eyes stared wildly out of her head, and she struggled for breath. Dora felt persuaded that she was on the verge of a fit of some kind.

"What is it? What is it?" she cried again, and Lady Camilla, thrusting out a newspaper, and, pointing to it with a shaking forefinger, managed, in a half asphyxiated whisper, to ejaculate—

"Read this!—read this!"

Dora took the *Times* from her trembling hands and read as follows:

"On the 23d inst., by special license, at 52 Portman Square, by the Rev. Charles Venner, rector of the parish of St. Matthew, John Howard Edward Ravenstoke, sixth Earl of Bainton, to Helen, only child of the late Colonel Dacre, of her Majesty's Royal Irish Fusiliers."

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Mrs. Torrington in a voice of utter amazement, "Great heavens above!" and then suddenly she dropped down upon an oak chest upon the landing behind her, and laughed and laughed till she could not speak for laughter!

Lady Camilla, with rage and indignation boiling within her, stood there glaring at her. Somehow this unseemly mirth restored her a little to herself, and when the widow's paroxysms began to subside, she found voice to say to her with a certain angry dignity—

"I fail to see the reason of your amusement. What are you laughing at, pray?"

"Oh, my dear Camilla! Pray, pray, pray forgive me! Really, I positively cannot help myself; it's too, too, unspeakably funny!"

“What is funny? That I should be absolutely ruined, and the hopes of my whole life, and all Ted’s prospects, blasted and ruined by the unprincipled machinations of a vile and miserable adventuress?”

“Oh no, my dear! Heaven knows I feel sorry enough for you; it’s horrible! But, really, when I come to think of that girl, and how clever she has been, and how completely she had outwitted you—it *does* make me laugh to see what perfect fools you and I, who thought ourselves so wise, have been in her hands! I positively can’t help admiring her!”

“It’s all very well for you, Dora,” said Lady Camilla impatiently and angrily. “Of course, you can afford to laugh; it’s not you who suffer by this. I should like to know, my dear, what you would have said if the wretch had run away and married Gilbert Nugent instead of my poor brother. She might have done that quite as easily.”

“Oh, no, my dear, she mightn’t. I took good care of that. I played my cards too carefully. You should have looked after her better. Why did you go bullying her and tormenting her that evening, when she was ill in bed, till you frightened her to running away to Lord Bainton for protection? You ought not to have let her out of your sight that night. You ought to have dressed her with your own hands like a mother and brought her downstairs with you, and kept your eye upon her, and coaxed and petted her till you had persuaded her into being civil to that man Warne,—instead of which you left her all by herself and scolded her till she got desperate and escaped on the sly from the house.”

“What is the use of going all over that again? I know I made a mistake, but who could have imagined

that I should be punished in such a cruel and horrible manner? Who could suppose that meek-looking girl could turn out to be such a viper? Such a monster! Such a perfect fiend!"

"I can't think now how she has managed this marriage. Why, Bainton was ill in bed, you heard only yesterday."

"That is how it has been done, depend upon it. He is ill still, no doubt. You see the marriage was celebrated in the house—not in a church. She has got over him whilst he was weak and ill; trumped up some story; played upon his feelings, I dare say."

"Oh, his feelings didn't require much playing upon, my dear. I always told you that Bainton was spooney on her; only you were so blind you wouldn't see it."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! oh, dear!" wailed Lady Camilla, wringing her hands piteously. "What will become of my poor Ted? His future will be ruined!"

"You can't be sure of that. Your brother may perhaps not alter his will," said the widow, with an attempt at consolation.

"Oh, trust the creature for that. It will be the very first thing she will see to, of course. She ought to be hung. Such crimes deserve capital punishment."

"Well, failing hanging her, which I'm afraid, under the existing laws of this country, isn't feasible, what steps do you propose to take?"

"I'm going up to town, of course."

"What, to Portman Square?"

"Of course not. To Lincoln's Inn. I have already sent off a telegram to Mr. Scarsdale. I shall go to his chambers and consult him."

"And Tom, is he going with you?"

"Tom is perfectly brutal to me! Like you, he

laughs—positively laughs—and says that Ted must take his chance, like other boys. He thinks, as you do, that Helen Dacre is cleverer than we have any of us given her credit for being. And what is more, he declares that the hunting is so nearly over that nothing will induce him to give up even one day and go up to town with me. Oh, men are selfish brutes!”

“So they are, dear. No doubt at all about that. We women all find it out in time, and I became aware of the fact a great many years ago. Well, Camilla, as Tom won’t go to London with you, I have a mind to—that is, if you will pay my expenses.”

“Oh, of course, Dora. And certainly—unkind as you are to me—you will be better than nobody. I can at any rate talk out to you.”

“Thanks, dearest. How nice you are; and who shall say that men have the sole monopoly of selfishness? Oh, my dear, don’t protest—no polite lies between you and me, please—we understand each other too thoroughly! And I am not going to pretend that I want to go to London with you merely in order to console and comfort you. I have got my own reasons, too, for wanting to go to town. I don’t mind telling you that I also have had bad news this morning. Read this letter,” and she pulled Nugent’s epistle out of her pocket.

It was now Lady Camilla’s turn to laugh.

“Escaped you after all, has he?”

“Not yet. He hasn’t started yet.”

“And you want to see him and alter his decision, I suppose?”

“Certainly. I mean to do my best to prevent his taking himself off to the antipodes.”

“Ah, well, my dear Dora,” remarked Lady Camilla

sententiously, as she folded up the letter and returned it to her. "If you take my advice you will let him go. It would be infinitely better for you if this somewhat discreditable alliance were broken off. I have always told you, you know, that I don't approve of it, neither does Tom. It is a disgraceful sort of affair altogether, and does not redound at all to the advantage of your reputation."

"Now stop that nonsense at once, Camilla!" interrupted Mrs. Torrington, with a heightened color. "The idea of your preaching morals to me is positively sickening! Neither you nor I can afford to pose to each other as saints—we know each other too well. We are both of us sinners—the only difference between us being that, whereas I am a sinner openly, avowedly, and honestly, you are one masked and disguised by hypocrisy and cant. What train are you going by, if you please? If you will tell me, I shall be quite ready to start in good time."

Lady Camilla made a sulky rejoinder as to the proposed time of her departure, and Mrs. Torrington, leaving her to digest her remarks as she chose, went back into her own room to make her preparations for the journey to town.

The two ladies travelled up to London by an afternoon train. Harmony had been restored between them. No good could accrue to either of them by a continuation of hostilities, and both were aware that to quarrel would be fatal to their mutual aims and interests.

They discussed the situation amicably and sympathetically together during the first half of the journey. Then, at the junction, midway to St. Pancras, an unforeseen interruption to their conversation occurred.

The first-class carriage which they had hitherto had to themselves was invaded by a fellow-traveller, who entered with much commotion, ushered in by guard and porters, and followed by numerous rugs, bags, and newspapers, that were handed in in succession by his man-servant.

The intruder was a stout, middle-aged, little man, with very red hair and an exceedingly long and narrow nose. His eyes, of a pale color, were set rather close together, and his mouth and chin, covered by a yellowish red beard and mustache, seemed to retreat altogether into the warm recesses of the fur collar of his remarkably handsome coat.

When the train had gone on again, and he had arranged a cloth rug embroidered with a large blue and gold monogram, and lined with dark fur, to his satisfaction across his knees, he looked up and met the wholly uninterested eyes of Mrs. Torrington, who happened to be seated opposite him.

No sooner had he looked at her than he appeared to be very much struck with her. Dora wore a smart little green felt hat, and a remarkably well-fitting cloth jacket. Her fair hair and delicate complexion contrasted becomingly with her wintry garments. The gentleman in the other fur coat considered her attentively—so attentively, in fact, that Dora dropped her eyes modestly upon her book. Presently—not perhaps without a purpose—she put up her hand to the leather strap to alter the height of the window. The stranger with the foxlike appearance sprang eagerly to his feet.

“Allow me?” he cried, with alacrity, seizing the strap out of her small hand. “Would you like it entirely up?” he inquired politely.

“Thanks—not quite—just to the last hole,” replied

Mrs. Torrington, with the sweetest smile. "That will do nicely."

Upon this introduction they entered into conversation. The weather and the unpunctuality of the train service formed the opening topics. From thence they passed easily to London—its theatres, its picture-galleries, its sights of all kinds.

Incidentally the stranger mentioned that he had lately given six thousand pounds for two small but exquisite sketches of Turner's at a recent sale at Christie and Manson's. He mentioned it airily and lightly, as one who was accustomed to deal in thousands.

Dora Torrington pricked up her ears—that is to say, she smiled more seraphically than ever. She said enthusiastically that she adored pictures, especially Turner's pictures, and would give anything on earth to see this particular pair of pictures.

Whereat Lady Camilla smiled sardonically to herself behind the shelter of her *World*.

The train was just slackening its speed into the terminus, and the stranger immediately entreated his fair neighbor effusively to come to his London house and see his picture-gallery. Then, ere he wished her adieu, he took out his card from a silver card-case and presented it to her.

Upon it was inscribed—

"Mr. Onesimus Bloggs, 264 Cromwell Road."

He entreated to know his charmer's name in return. Mrs. Torrington produced her card.

"And will you not bring Mr. Torrington with you?" inquired Mr. Bloggs, blandly studying the card through his eye-glass.

"Alas! I am a widow!" sighed Dora in her most pathetic style.

"Your friend, then?" continued Mr. Bloggs, with scarcely concealed delight, and with a wave of his hand toward the opposite corner of the carriage.

Mrs. Torrington introduced her. "My cousin, Lady Camilla Greyson." Whereupon Mr. Bloggs smiled more blandly than ever. The aristocratic handle finished his subjugation. He went off a wholly conquered and semi-idiotic man.

"Pray, what is the meaning of this farce?" inquired Lady Camilla coldly, as the two ladies seated themselves in a four-wheeled cab with their boxes over their heads.

Dora shrugged her shoulders with a half laugh.

"Oh, it is always a good thing to have a second string to one's bow," she answered carelessly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

UPON hearing from Helen's lips the dreadful words which parted him indeed from her forever, Gilbert Nugent staggered back, half stunned, against the wall.

The blow was so utterly unexpected and so terrible that for the first few moments he was scarcely conscious of the pain that he was enduring.

"Married this morning! married this morning!" he repeated once or twice, with a dull bewilderment, and although he said the words aloud they seemed to convey no sort of meaning to his brain.

It was only the sight of Helen's distress that recalled him at length to a full sense of what had happened to him.

Helen had fallen forward across the couch on which she had been sitting; her face lay buried in her outstretched arms, whilst the most heart-rending sobs shook her whole body. It seemed as though at length all the varied emotions and painful experiences of the whole day had culminated in this almost hysterical outburst of grief. Those great tearless sobs that arose in the silence of the little room one after the other with a terrible regularity, seemed to rend the frail and tender form with cruel and agonizing precision.

She offered no explanation—she made no excuses—only she lay there prone and speechless, like a dumb animal in its mortal anguish.

It was horrible to witness. It recalled him to himself—it seemed to bridge over the yawning gulf between

them—to bring them near to one another in this common calamity.

He stole forward and knelt down by her side. “Don’t, dear—don’t!” he said gently and tenderly, passing his hand softly over her thick tumbled locks. “For my sake, Helen, don’t sob like that.”

The sound of his voice calmed her a little; she tried to control herself, and his hand still caressed her head with a gentle touch.

He murmured some low, vague words of comfort, such as he might have spoken to a weeping child—words that meant but little in themselves, yet that soothed and quieted her instinctively. After a little while she sat up and faced him, looking so white, and worn, and wretched that it cut him to the heart to see her.

“Why are you so good to me? I do not deserve it,” she said, brokenly. “How is it that you don’t curse and revile me?”

“My poor little girl!” was his only answer, and then, after a moment of silence, he broke out passionately and wildly—

“Oh, why did you do it? Why did you do it?”

“You had left me,” she answered, with a gesture of despair. “You told me that it was all over—all over. Those were your words. Oh! did you ever think how they would ring in my ears day and night—day and night—till they almost drove me mad, and then they persecuted me to marry that man whom I hate. They told me he could force me by law to marry him, but I would rather have died than be his wife! And so I came here. Lord Bainton was my only friend; he was always good to me. I had no home, and he offered me his; no protector, and with him I could be safe. I had lost you. I had no hope anywhere, and so I did what he wanted

because I knew I should make him happy and should be at peace myself. But oh, if I had known that you loved me still, that you would forgive me so soon, do you suppose I could have done it? It was only because I thought you had done with me forever."

"Ah, child!" he answered very sadly, rising slowly from his knees and leaning against the mantelpiece opposite to her. "You know very little of love if you think that it can be killed so easily. As soon as I had left you I was wretched. My conscience began to reproach me for my harshness; my heart to weep a thousand excuses for your fault. It was certain to have been only a question of time that I should come back to throw myself at your feet again; and then one day a friendly woman gave me the help of her sweet encouragement, and my pride surrendered to my love, and I came to you; but I have come too late. Oh, my God! too late! too late!" And, with a groan, he turned away from her, and hid his face in his hands.

"If you had only come yesterday—only yesterday"—she wailed—"I should have been saved."

"It is all my fault," he said, after a brief pause, almost more eloquent than words—and she could see, with a pang, that there were tears in his eyes—"all my fault. I see it now plainly. I have behaved like a coward and a blackguard to you—to you, as well as to that other woman, whose life, like yours, I have spoilt by my folly and my sinful weakness."

"You will go back to her now, I suppose?" she said presently, moved by a faint gleam of that woman's jealousy which not all the terrible reality of the misfortune that had befallen them both was able to extinguish in her.

"No. By the God above us, I swear to you that I

will never go back to her! I have already written to free myself from her toils, and I will never return to the false and shameful position which I had drifted into, at first unconsciously, but in the end with a culpable knowledge of what I was doing. Do you think, Helen, that after having known and loved you—you, who are the purest, the noblest, the best—that I could go back again to the slavery, the moral degradation in which I have been held so long? No, no; you have at least done one good thing for me—you have shown me that to have been loved by a pure-souled woman, such as you are, is something to be proud and glad of to one's dying day—a sort of consecration which I shall never forget or be unworthy of again."

"Thank God for that!" she murmured, with a gush of tears in which there was no longer any bitterness, and that relieved a little the aching pain at her heart.

"I am going away, Helen," he continued presently, "going, as I have told you, to the other side of the world. Only that now, instead of remaining there for three years, I shall make my home there. I am a poor man. I have idled away my life long enough. It is time that I put my shoulder to the wheel, as other poor men have to do; and instead of living upon my friends I mean to work for myself—earn my own bread. In the colonies there are many openings for a man who is young and strong, as I am, and I shall soon find something to do."

Then Helen rose and laid her small hands gently and pleadingly upon his arm.

"Do me one kindness before you go, Gilbert—it is the only thing I ask of you. It is I who have supplanted you in your uncle's will, who robbed you of the fortune that ought to have been yours. Let me at any rate repair that injustice. Take from me, before you go, at

least sufficient to keep you in comfort and to start you in your new life."

"No, no," he interrupted quickly, laying a hand upon hers. "I cannot take your money, Helen. I could not touch it. Don't think me ungrateful or proud; but it is impossible. Besides—your husband—" his voice failed a little as he said the word.

"My husband is good and generous," she answered, not without a little tremor of wifely pride; "he will agree to all that I wish. He would be the first to ask you."

"Say no more, I entreat you," he said hastily. "I cannot even discuss such a thing with you. Ask me anything else instead, Helen—anything else in the wide world, and I will do it."

For a few moments she was silent—thinking deeply. Deep down in her heart there was indeed a thought—a wish—that her dignity, her pride, her position as the Countess of Bainton almost forbade her to put into words. And yet—and yet—the longer she thought of it the more it seemed to her that it was utterly impossible to her to let him go from her forever without some such word being spoken between him and her.

The present hour was like a death-bed parting. When they bade one another farewell—as in a few more brief moments it would become necessary to do—they would bid each other good-by forever! There could be no recalling of him again—no possibility of another interview. When he left this room where he and she stood now, speaking heart to heart as they had never spoken before, he would go also out of her life forever. It was her last opportunity.

Could she, loving him as she did, and sure as she was of his steadfast and entire devotion, permit him to

turn his back upon her forever without speaking that one word which might come to mean so much, so very much to him throughout all the black future of the coming years?

The color rose hotly and burningly in her downcast face. He saw how she trembled and how her lips quivered, and guessed that she had indeed yet another request to make of him.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Tell me and I will do it. Did you not save my life, Helen? and is not that life yours by right of conquest? Speak to me the thought that I can see is in your heart."

She lifted her eyes with a sudden courage to his.

"Can you give me some address that will always find you?" she asked hurriedly.

He wrote down on the back of his card the name of the bankers in Auckland who would always know where to forward his letters.

"Now swear to me," she said, as she took the card from his hand, "that if ever, no matter how many years hence, I write or telegraph to you to come back, that if I want you you will come to me."

"I swear to you," he answered solemnly, "that if ever you send for me I will come to you from the uttermost ends of the earth if it is in human possibility for me to do so."

After that there was little left to be said between them. Both knew that the moment of parting had come. To prolong these last words and looks would be worse than useless. She glanced at the clock, and he answered the gesture with a sigh.

"Yes, I know. It is time for me to go." He took her two hands in his as she stood up before him, and looked earnestly into her face. "Dear love," he said,

with a deep and solemn tenderness, "you will, I know, keep a brave heart, and bear nobly the trouble which has fallen upon you. Do not reproach yourself too much. These things are beyond the power of us blind, human puppets. We cannot struggle with our fate. We loved one another—we might have been happy—but—it was not to be. But if ever in your darkest hours of trial and of loneliness it is any comfort to you to remember it, do not forget that somewhere in this world there is one true heart that will be forever yours—one staunch friend who would give his life-blood to serve you. You have taught me a great deal, Helen. As I told you once before, you have been my good angel. I always knew that somewhere beneath my frivolity, my recklessness, and my many bad actions, there was within me that which was capable of raising me, and of making a man of me. Well, it is your sweet hand that has done this for me. The old life is dead for me, a new and I trust a better one is before me, and wherever I go your gentle spirit will go with me to encourage me and to strengthen me in my up-hill path. God bless you, Helen. My good angel!"

He took her head between his hands and gazed with a long, lingering intensity into her dark sorrow-laden eyes; then he stooped and pressed his lips for one moment upon her forehead.

There was no passion in that kiss—it was solemn and sad, with the tender solemnity, the unutterable sadness of an eternal farewell!

In another moment it was over. The door closed softly upon him; and there was, in that empty little room, only a heartbroken woman, lying in speechless anguish prone upon the ground.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LADY CAMILLA got quite accustomed to sitting in Mr. Scarsdale's office in Lincoln's Inn during the next few days. She learnt to know every piece of old-fashioned furniture in the room by heart. The heavy writing-table, with its hacked and ink-stained green leather top; and the big splashed glass inkstand; and all the papers and blue documents tied up with red tape that were piled upon it; the mahogany chairs, the book-cases round the walls filled with dull looking legal books, and the shelves that were heaped up to the ceiling with black japanned tin boxes, each labelled with the name of its particular owner—all became as familiar to her as the luxurious accessories and knick-nacks of her own boudoir at Old Park.

She was in that dreary room morning, noon, and night. Sometimes, if Mr. Scarsdale happened to be engaged with another client, she had to wait there for perhaps over an hour for him, and at such times she would sit by herself, taking in every detail of her surroundings until she thought she must collapse in a state of imbecility. When she had read through all the leading articles in the morning paper laid by her side by an obsequious clerk—all the news it contained, political and theatrical, all the records of royalty, all the notices of new books and new soaps, had studied the long columns of advertisements, the coachmen, the cooks and the housemaids, till she knew them all by heart, and began to weave histories about their last places and future situations, then impatiently she would toss the

paper aside, and her eyes would wander for the hundredth time from the gas-stained ceiling to the threadbare carpet, and from the dusty backs of the law books, and the white painted names upon the tin boxes to the dreary lookout of the back yard, that was visible through the dusty window panes, where the London sparrows chirped and chattered with irritating monotony, till perhaps a famine-stricken cat with mangy fur and stealthy movements, would prowl along the top of the wall, creating quite a diversion in the morning's proceedings by scattering the frightened flock into a sudden upward rush of wings out of her sight.

Why Lady Camilla sat there for all those weary hours it would be a puzzling thing to say. It is certain that she did not derive much consolation from anything that Mr. Scarsdale told her. He had not scrupled to inform her that Lord Bainton had made a new will on his wedding-day, nor to imply by many shakings of the head and pursing up of the lips that this will was wholly unfavorable to young Mr. Greyson's future prospects. Scarsdale did not go to the length of showing her the will, but he allowed her to worm out of him the whole substance and gist of it, and at the same time he contrived by hints and mysterious allusions to instil into her a suspicion that the new Lady Bainton, who had doubtless worked in an undue manner over the invalid's feelings, was perfectly capable of working a further mischief to her and to hers.

A legacy of a thousand pounds by his own earnest entreaty, he said, was still to come to Ted Greyson. Mr. Scarsdale was of opinion that if Lady Bainton could she would wrest from him even this small and miserable sum.

"But is there nothing to be done—nothing?" Lady

Camilla would cry in despair. "Can no laws be brought to bear upon this wicked and mercenary woman, to force her to disgorge the money that ought by every right, human and divine, to belong to my poor wronged boy?"

"There is unfortunately nothing to be done at present. The will was drawn up by me. I was almost, I most solemnly assure you, my lady, in tears. It is not possible to move a finger in the matter now. The law"—Mr. Scarsdale always spoke this word as though he was alluding to a real and living thing—a Deity to be only mentioned with reverence and bated breath—"the law allows every man to dispose of his own as he pleases, provided always the form of his disposition is in order, and he himself is of sound mind, and his decision free and unprejudiced. It is impossible to dispute the fundamental principle that a testator has the power to leave his estate to his wife."

"Then it is hopeless?"

Mr. Scarsdale cleared his throat, and crossed and uncrossed his legs.

"It is not very hopeful. At the same time, there *is* a loophole."

"Ah!"

"Mind, I don't say it is much—it were safer, in fact, not to build any hopes upon it; but still, there *is* a loophole. Your brother, Lady Camilla, was exceedingly ill on the morning he directed me to draw up this unjust will, and if it could be proved that the young woman had brought any pressure or undue influence to bear upon his lordship's mind, we might have a very pretty case at his death—which, alas, cannot now be a far distant event—upon which to dispute the alteration of the wishes of his whole life, which were certainly in favor of your son. But, save in the way of collecting evidence,

we cannot do anything or move in any way at the present moment, and certainly I must advise you not to attempt to go to the house. Our business now must be to work our way cautiously—to find out what happened in the sick chamber on the day that his lordship astounded me by sending his valet to me to command me to draw up a new will in favor of a lady whom he was going to marry within a few hours. I assure you, Lady Camilla, such an astonishing thing has never happened in all my professional experience. I said to myself, at once, Who has brought about this?"

"But this evidence that you speak about; how is it to be obtained?"

"Mainly from the servants who were in attendance on his lordship at the time. They will have to be carefully questioned—severally and separately. Opportunities will have to be watched for and carefully seized. It will be a matter of time," added Mr. Scarsdale, leaning back in his armchair and considering Lady Camilla's face attentively, "it will be, I feel I must add, a matter of money."

Lady Camilla was quick enough to see that what Mr. Scarsdale meant to imply was that he must be well paid for the investigations he proposed to start, and that if he were paid, and well paid, that they would be more likely to turn out satisfactorily.

With a heightened color, she told him that to secure her son's interests she was prepared to make a sacrifice—any sacrifice, in fact.

And Mr. Scarsdale smiled blandly across the table at her.

Things were just at this point in their conversation one day when a clerk entered the room and whispered something in the solicitor's ear.

Mr. Scarsdale rose. "Will you be so obliging as to excuse me one moment, Lady Camilla? There is some one waiting who wishes to see me very particularly"; and with a bow the solicitor left the room.

Lady Camilla groaned. She knew what "one moment" meant in Mr. Scarsdale's vocabulary; it ranged over a wide period of time—anything, from an hour and a half down to twenty minutes, was comprised within the elastic limits of that convenient "one moment." It was never by any chance less than twenty minutes.

She took up the paper—only to fling it down again with angry impatience. Even the servants who wanted places interested her no longer.

"Second where six are kept—town preferred," she murmured aloud, glancing at the requirements of a housemaid. "Why, the girl must be a fool. There aren't six houses in all London that want six housemaids, I suppose. I hope she will be out of place for six months," she added with an irrational viciousness—the fact being that the poor lady was so harrowed, and irritated, and embittered, that she really wanted something or somebody to wreak her wrath upon.

Presently, tired of sitting upon the straight-backed chair where she had remained without moving for the last three-quarters of an hour, she rose and sauntered to the window, and stood for some minutes looking out into the yard. The prospect was not inviting. The usual sparrows, the usual dirt, and presently the usual mangy cat, bent on extermination, creeping round the corner of the scullery roof next door.

Bah! How sordid and ugly it was; and how tired she was of it all.

Was the prospect that Scarsdale (who wanted to be well paid) held out to her sufficiently hopeful, sufficiently

promising, to recompense her for all these hours of dreary boredom?

Lady Camilla turned away from the window with a gesture of impatience, and as she did so her eyes fell upon a high, green-painted iron safe which stood in a sombre corner behind the window curtain.

What made her notice it particularly now was that it presented an unaccustomed outline to her eye. The door was wide open, and Mr. Scarsdale's keys depended from the lock.

Lady Camilla stood before it absently for some minutes. She had never, to her knowledge, looked into an open safe before. On the lower shelf stood a strongly clamped little box.

"Family diamonds, I dare say," thought Lady Camilla to herself. "I wonder whose they are?"

Above these were three drawers. She pulled open the first with just that kind of idle instinct which impels people to do something entirely purposeless, just because they have nothing to do.

The drawer was full of keys, and to every key was tied a white label, on which was written its object and its purpose.

"Lady Barker's settlements"; "Joseph Haldon, Esq., will and codicil to do"; "Mrs. Anna Green's testamentary provisions, plate, pictures, jewellery, etc."; "Title deeds of the Rotherborough estate"; "Title deeds of freehold house property in London"; and so on, and so on. She took the keys up one after the other, and read these inscriptions simply and solely out of idle curiosity. Presently her fingers touched another, and as her eyes fell upon the label of this one her hand tightened suddenly over the key. "Title deeds of Lord Bainton's estates and property in Cheshire. Agreement of lease

of Portman Square house and stables. Will dated 1880," was what was written upon this one, and then, beneath, two or three words were added in ink, that was apparently quite fresh, "Will dated February 23d, 1889."

That was the date of Lord Bainton's wedding last week.

Lady Camilla remained staring at the key in her hand, perfectly immovable. For some minutes she did not wink an eyelash nor stir a finger. She was plunged in thought. Presently a quick frown swept across her brows, and she put her hand quickly forward as though to replace it in the drawer, then with a short, gasping breath she drew it slowly back again, and passed her other hand with a sort of distracted movement over her face. There were beads of perspiration standing on her forehead.

She turned round, walked swiftly across the room, and stood before the shelves with the piled-up rows of japanned boxes upon them.

There it was sure enough—where she had read upon it over and over again the inscription:

"The Earl of Bainton. Deeds, papers, etc."

Her own particular box, labelled "Lady C. Greyson's marriage settlements," stood below it.

"Deeds, papers, etc.," murmured Lady Camilla below her breath. "The *will* is there—the *two* wills!"—and then she was quite still again for just as long as one might have counted twenty.

All at once decision came to her. Her face, that had been pale before, flushed up into a deep brick-red. She threw one hurried, guilty glance backward over her shoulder toward the door, and then she lifted the tin box down from the shelf.

It was the work of a moment to fit the key into the

lock and to open it. Her trembling hands searched hurriedly among the papers with which it was filled to the brim. The new will lay almost at the top; the old will nearly at the bottom. She looked over the latter first, and it took but a few seconds to perceive that here everything, save a few trifling legacies, was left in trust to herself for "my nephew Edward Thomas Greyson;" whilst in the new will all, with the exception of the one thousand pounds legacy to Ted, was devised unconditionally and absolutely to "my beloved wife, Helen, Countess of Bainton."

Lady Camilla put back the will of 1880 safely at the bottom of the box, locked it up, and replaced it upon the shelf exactly as it stood before. Then she made three swift paces across the room toward the fireplace, and in another ten seconds, of the last will and testament of the Earl of Bainton, there was nothing left save a few blackened fragments, fast fluttering into nothingness among the flames.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MRS. TORRINGTON could not, naturally, be bothered to accompany Lady Camilla every day to Mr. Scarsdale's office in Lincoln's Inn. Besides, she had her own aims and objects in coming to London, and although she was glad enough to dine and go to a theatre with her cousin in the evenings, and to meet her at breakfast in the coffee-room of the hotel where they were staying, she occupied herself all day in very different ways.

Her first day in town, unfortunately, was productive of intense annoyance and disappointment to her, and as far as the primary business of her visit to London was concerned, she was rewarded only by entire and absolute failure.

On the afternoon of her arrival she had employed herself in certain very characteristic and feminine preliminaries. She had visited her milliner and had purchased a very becoming Paris bonnet. Later on, from a fashionable mantle emporium in Bond street, she had issued forth arrayed in a smart velvet jacket of the latest shape, trimmed with chinchilla fur. New gloves, boots, and dainty little embroidered handkerchiefs were added to her already large store of such articles, and she ended her day at the hairdresser's where her fair locks were washed, curled, and perfumed, and her fair face touched up by some mysterious process into a new and clever similitude of the bloom and freshness of early girlhood. The next morning, as soon as Lady Camilla had gone off to Lincoln's Inn, Dora first arrayed herself in her

new purchases and then concealed the glories of her raiment beneath a long cloak and a very thick veil. These preparations being arranged, she desired that a hansom might be called for her.

Gilbert Nugent was standing in the middle of his chambers in the Albany, much as Marius is said to have stood amidst the ruins of Carthage.

Of those beautiful orderly rooms nothing was now remaining save chaos and confusion. Boxes to the right of him! Boxes to the left of him! Gun-cases, cartridge-cases, fishing-tackle all over the floor. Clothes, boots, books, linen on every available chair and table. Parcels that poured in from the tailor, the hosier, the bootmaker, the outfitter, at every moment. A new saddle from Souter's on the centre table; a new pair of revolvers, glistening in their rosewood cases, from Colt's upon the side-table; and in the midst of the hurly-burly toiled and slaved a much be-driven valet, with his coat and waistcoat off and his shirt-sleeves turned up to the elbows.

The master, himself coatless, worked as hard as the man, packing in everything he could lay hands upon promiscuously into a huge, half-full packing-case in the centre of the sitting-room. Through the open door of the room beyond, the bed, heaped up with more articles of clothing, and the dressing-table, strewn with brushes, razors, and bottles, and all sorts of toilet implements, could furthermore be perceived.

"All this, Baines," quoth Gilbert Nugent, "must be ready by six o'clock to-night. The things for the hold of the ship, I mean. My light portmanteau and the Gladstone bag and the dressing-bag, and that square leather box yonder, may be left until to-morrow."

"That's just the trouble of it, sir," replied the perspiring valet; "if it wasn't for the dividing of the things,

and the settling of which is to go where, why packing for the South Pole would be nothing but child's play. And who is to unpack and put it all straight for you, I should like to know?" continued the servant, presently; "who's to find your things again, and brush'em, and lay'em out for you, on t'her side of the world?"

"I am afraid I shall have to learn to do all that kind of thing myself, Baines."

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Baines, brushing his shirt-sleeve across his eyes. "Oh, Mr. Nugent, sir! why wont you take me with you? I can't abear to think of your having nobody to look after you."

"My good fellow, I'd take you gladly if I could afford it; but, you see, I'm going away because I can't pay my way at home any longer, and I shall have to work for my living. In those new countries a gentleman must work, and can't keep a valet, you know."

"Oh, Mr. Nugent, I'd serve you for nothing—that I would! Do take me."

"No, my man," said Gilbert gently, not untouched by the man's devotion; "I would not accept such a sacrifice from you, although I thank you heartily for suggesting it. You will have no difficulty in getting a good place at home, and a far better master, Baines, than ever I have been to you."

Baines bent low over the portmanteau he was filling, and one or two tears dropped silently down upon his master's shirt-fronts.

"Never one who will do so much credit to a servant, sir," he said brokenly, "or set off well-cleaned breeches and boots so well on a 'unting morning, nor one who could look one 'half so haristocratic in evening dress."

And it was just at this juncture, and upon the utter-

ance of this heartfelt testimony to Gilbert's virtues, that the bell at the outer door rang loudly.

"Run to the door, Baines—that must be those horse-rugs and bridles from the Army and Navy stores, at last!" cried Nugent; "they swore I should get them last night. However, there is still room to pack them in this case, thank goodness." Baines went across the little outer passage to the door. He remained away for some minutes, but presently came back again with rather a mysterious air, closing the door cautiously behind him.

"It's a lady, sir," he said in a whisper.

"A lady? I can't see any one, Baines."

"So I've told her, sir. But she wont take no denial, and says she must see you very particular at once."

"What is she like?"

"I can't say, sir. She has got a thick veil tied all over 'er 'ead."

The color rose to Gilbert's face. A lady deeply veiled. What wild dream was this? Could it be Helen come to take one last look at him, to bid him farewell once more? As the thought rushed through his mind he more than half regretted it: the parting had been so hard, and it was over. Why seek to renew so sad a struggle? Why re-open the aching wound? And yet the thought that she should have risked so much, her safety, her very reputation, just to see him again, thrilled him at the same time with a strange sense of exultant joy. So filled was his mind with Helen's image that it never occurred to him for a moment that it could be any one else.

"Did the lady give her name, Baines?"

"No, sir. I did ask her, but she said she wouldn't give

no name, but she thought you'd be sure to know who she was."

"Very well, I will see her. Show her in. And, Baines," he called out, as the servant was turning to leave the room, "you go off at once to the chemist's in Bond Street after those bottles I ordered there; you can bring them back with you."

"Yes, sir. I quite understand."

The door was thrown open, and a thickly veiled lady, whose figure was concealed in the folds of a voluminous cloak, entered the room.

With outstretched hands Nugent strode forward to greet her.

"Helen!" escaped from his eager lips, and then he fell back suddenly. "Ah, no! Ah, it is you!"

A peal of ringing laughter answered him. The cloak slipped to the ground; she threw the veil from her head, and Dora Torrington, brilliant and lovely, but with a glitter that was not all love in her eyes, stood before him.

"No! As it happens I am *not* 'Helen!'" she cried. "Not this time! Is it, may I ask, the custom of that fair lady—that newly wedded wife—to come by herself to your rooms? I should have thought that the Countess of Bainton valued her new position too highly to be guilty of such Bohemian practices."

"I must request you to leave that lady out of your conversation," said Nugent angrily, deeply annoyed with himself for having let fall her name in his mistaken agitation.

"Oh, certainly. Anything for a quiet life, my dear boy. But what on earth is the meaning of this chaos?" she cried, casting rapid glances round the disordered room. "What are you about?"

"You see. I am packing up," he said coldly.

"Packing up! Why, where in the world are you going?"

"Did I not tell you in my letter? I am going to New Zealand. My passage to Auckland is taken in the *Zenobia*. I start the day after to-morrow."

"Not so fast, Gilbert; not so fast! I really cannot consent to your exiling yourself from your country, and from me, in this foolish fashion."

"I am afraid that I shall have to dispense with your consent, much as I may regret being unable to obtain it."

"That is all nonsense!" she cried, furious at his cold and sarcastic words and manner, "utter nonsense! You cannot shake me off in this easy manner. You are bound to me by too many ties—too many vows. You wrote of remaining away for three years."

"I have changed my mind since I said so."

"You have changed your mind?"

"I am never coming back."

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" she cried distractedly, and, flinging herself down upon the sofa, she burst into a passion of loud sobs that were not perhaps quite genuine. She had never seen him in this cold, hard mood before. She did not quite believe in it now. She was certain that she might melt him by her well-timed grief; that she would still be able to have her way with him.

But her tears did not touch him. "My dear Dora," he said quietly, "pray control yourself, and listen to common sense. Did I not explain to you fully in my letter that all that was to be at an end. We have had enough of this farce—you and I. Years ago I would have married you without a penny—would have worked

for you, have devoted my life to you. But you would not have me. You would not marry a poor man: you were worldly wise. I do not blame you. I dare say I was not worth facing poverty with. You said we were to wait until I got my uncle's money, a chance that was always a remote one. Well what happened? We did wait—for six long and weary years—till my love and my patience alike were worn out; and then I had the misfortune to offend my uncle, and he left his money to some one else."

"To that woman who has supplanted me."

"He had a perfect right to leave his money to whom he pleased," he continued coldly; "but to you it makes surely all the difference. I am what I was when you did me the honor to refuse to become my wife before—a poor man, hampered by debts and unable to support a smart lady of fashion in that luxury which is no doubt her due. Why cannot you accept the situation? Why do you want to keep me still dangling idle at your side when I have not the faintest chance of ever being able to marry you? Why, do you not see that your position with regard to me is injuring you in the eyes of the world—is fatal to your chances of making a good marriage, and is, moreover—if you will forgive me saying so—ruinous to your reputation?"

"And what if I care for none of these things—if I have no desire to marry any one? What if I am wholly indifferent to what the world says?" she cried agitatedly.

"No woman can afford to be that," he replied coldly.

She came close to him, stretched up her arms, and wound them about his neck. He strove to shake her off, but she clung to him. All the anger had gone out

of her face. Only the longing and the tenderness remained.

"I can—I can!" she cried, with emotion, "because I love you, Gilbert; because you are still more than all the world to me; because if you go away and leave me I shall die."

"I am obliged to go—"

"Then, for pity's sake take me with you, Gilbert. I have loved you for so many years. You cannot throw me over now—you cannot!"

"Have I not told you already that it must all be over, Dora? Why do you give yourself and me the pain of this explanation? Why do you force me to say again what I have told you before—that I no longer love you?"

She fell back from him weeping. "Oh, have men no hearts?" she wailed.

"I do not think, Dora, there has been for some time past as much heart as vanity in your feeling toward me."

"You are ungenerous—and see," she cried, with a sudden energy, "I will prove to you that you are mistaken—that I love you truly. Poor as you are, I will marry you, and I will go with you to the other side of the world. Get a special license, and we will be married to-morrow. I will give up everything—my friends, my country—everything I care about, and I will come with you and try to be a good wife to you in your new life. *Now* do you believe that I love you unselfishly? *Now* do you understand what you are to me?"

There was a short silence. She stood before him breathless with anxiety. She meant what she said, every word of it. The homage she had received from him for so long was so sweet to her that she was prepared to sacrifice everything sooner than lose it. For the first time she was offering to him of her own free

will what in the early days of their friendship he had pleaded for often on his knees in vain. She devoured his face with her eyes, whilst he, sombre and gloomy, with a frowning brow and head bent down, stood sternly—almost forbiddingly silent.

At length he lifted his eyes and looked at her. There was something worse than anger in them—there was contempt.

“You do me a great honor, Mrs. Torrington,” he said, in slow, measured words of scorn; “and I am grateful to you for the flattering proposal you have made to me. I must, however, decline to avail myself of your generosity. I have no intention of marrying at all; and—forgive me for adding—if I had, I should have no desire to make *you* my wife.”

For a moment she was speechless with anger; then, like a mad woman, she burst forth into a perfect torrent of invectives, calling him in her livid fury by every violent name that she could hurl at him.

Then, gathering her cloak with a wild gesture about her, she turned her back upon him and left him, slamming the door loudly behind her as she went.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HELEN had but little leisure to spend in mourning over her lost happiness during the days that followed her last farewell to the man she loved so hopelessly. Her husband and his illness took up her whole time. He was still in great and constant danger, and it seemed often doubtful whether he would live or die. Necessity quickly made her helpful and efficient in the sick room. The earl liked to have her near him—to feel the touch of her soft hands, and to murmur a few low words of endearment to her as she bent over his bed with food or medicine. If he was too weak even for this, his eyes could still follow her graceful figure as she moved about the room, with the pathetic wistfulness of a dog-like affection.

In all her own private sorrow and remorse she was deeply touched and sincerely grateful to him, rejoicing to think that she could do something for him who had done so much for her. As the days went by, too, the first keen edge of her regret and her despair wore off, and she resigned herself to her fate. She was happier after she had read in the shipping intelligence that the *Zenobia* had sailed. It made it easier for her to bear when she knew for certain that Nugent was actually gone, and that she could never see him again.

She flung herself with ardor into all the small details of nursing, and grew at last to feel as though the world itself had no wider horizon than the four walls of the sick room—no other interest beyond the rise and fall

of the invalid's temperature, the due administration of his medicines, and the anxious consideration of the delicacies with which it would be possible to tempt his feeble appetite.

In the course of these entirely wife-like ministration Lady Bainton managed to fall out with the nurse. She had never really liked or trusted her, and at last found her out in some trifling act of negligence. It was the work of one day to report her conduct to Sir Augustus Rolls, and to request him to substitute another.

Mrs. Hogan departed at nightfall, vowing vengeance against her; and Helen, all unconscious of the enemy that she had made, congratulated herself on having got rid of her so quickly and so easily.

Sir Augustus Rolls no longer regarded her now with suspicious disapproval. For, however mean the motives for which she had married him, he was forced to admit that she did her duty to the old man; and her devotion and tender assiduity to the invalid won at length his admiration as well as his respect. Sometimes, too, for other reasons, Helen was tempted to feel almost glad that fate had played such strange tricks with her life, and had left her stranded in the quiet seclusion of a sick man's house.

For she enjoyed now a complete immunity from the persecutions of Mr. Frederick Warne. One reproachful letter from Miss Fairbrother did, indeed, reach her, wherein she was upbraided bitterly for her ingratitude and her cruelty to her dear and sorely tried nephew; but as Helen failed to see where the ingratitude and cruelty lay she very wisely determined to send no reply to her letter, and there the correspondence ended.

It would indeed have caused her something akin to amusement could she have been present to witness the

rage and indignation at Aberdare House upon the arrival of the news of her marriage. Frederick, indeed, forgetting the high and lofty ideal which it had been his pride ever to act up to—at least, before others—lapsed into the failings of the vulgar, and swore roundly and freely in the most unvarnished terms at the lady of his late affections—considerably to the horror and consternation of his aged relative, who was fairly frightened out of her wits by the manly vigor of his language.

“My dear! My dear!” she cried, lifting her hands in trembling protestation. “Pray, pray control yourself! Suppose any of the girls should overhear you, or the new pupil teacher who only came last week. I made every allowance for your disappointment, Frederick; but however badly that unhappy girl has behaved to you, strive to remember, my dear, that it is sent you as a cross, and that we must always bow meekly and without murmuring beneath the chastening rod.”

The “chastening rod” did not reduce Mr. Warne to meekness in the least; in fact, his aunt’s words merely had the effect of diverting the channel of his wrath upon herself.

“Why did you ever put it into my head to want the girl? It is all your fault, aunt. You should never have allowed me to waste my time upon her. You ought to have known that she was bad and false at heart, and unworthy of me.”

“My dear nephew, you are unjust to me,” replied the old lady, feeling hurt and injured.

“Many is the viper,” she continued sententiously, for she delighted in a metaphor, “that has been nourished and fed in the dove’s nest, and has rewarded its benefactor’s care only by striking her to the heart.”

And Miss Fairbrother carried out her illustration by slapping her jet-beaded chest with tragic emphasis—thereby leading it to be supposed that if Helen were the viper she herself was undoubtedly the dove.

“It seems hard upon me, aunt, that I should have my affections trampled upon by a viper,” groaned the young man.

“Vipers glide; they do not trample—they have no legs,” amended Miss Fairbrother, by force of habit instructively and didactically; “and between ourselves, Frederick, you must confess that it is a greater disappointment to lose the money than the girl herself.”

“I consider money as mere dross—only an instrument to success which in the hands of the wise can be turned to good account, and which in the hands of the foolish becomes like chaff before the wind.”

As there was no controverting such an admirable and incontestable statement the conversation here languished, and Frederick went his way to his daily work, whilst Miss Fairbrother relieved her feelings by sitting down and writing to the delinquent what she termed “a piece of her mind.”

Having done this and posted her letter, Miss Fairbrother sighed a little sadly.

“After all, I was fond of the girl,” she thought, as she sat by herself in her little study during the long hours when her pupils supposed her to be reading historical and scientific treatises, but when in reality she was either dozing or dreaming idly over her past life. “Of all the pupil teachers I have ever had Helen Dacre was the one I liked the best. She had no method—no order; she was dissatisfied with her life here; but she was gentle and she had nice soft eyes and a low voice. She did not rub me up the wrong way, like that black-

haired girl with the beady eyes, or like the new one here now, with the rasping voice and long, hooked nose. If it had not been for Frederick Helen might have come back to see me sometimes, for I don't think she disliked me. Perhaps it was a mistake to have tried to make up a match between them. They were never suited to each other, and I suppose she only accepted him in the first instance for the sake of a home. When she came into the money we ought to have given up the idea. But then it was a great temptation—a very great temptation. Frederick had such noble aims, dear fellow! and that money would have been the making of him. He would have made his mark in the world, would Frederick, if he had a little capital at his back; whereas now, I suppose, he will have to go on plodding in an inferior position to the end of his days. Ah, it was a sad pity that he got no real hold over the child's heart when he had the chance. That is where the mischief lay, I suppose. She was imaginative, silly girl, and I suppose Frederick did not flatter her enough. Ah, well! Life is a strange thing; and only to think of my little pupil teacher marrying an earl—a real live earl!" she repeated slowly to herself more than once, as though not altogether displeased to dwell upon the impressive thought. And then presently Miss Fairbrother dropped off comfortably to sleep, and dreamed that Helen was kneeling at her feet entreating her to accept her whole fortune of thirty thousand pounds tied up in a canvas bag, and that Lord Bainton was placing an earl's coronet in gilt paper upon Frederick's head in the background, and pressing upon him his family mansion in Portman Square as a wedding present.

The early days of Helen's married life passed away sadly and monotonously enough, and often she asked

herself with a sort of amazement whether she could really be the Countess of Bainton, or whether she was not, after all, nothing but Helen Dacre, a friendless orphan girl, with no place and no home in the world.

And all these days the *Zenobia* ploughed her way through the ocean waves farther and farther from England's cliffs, bearing away the man with whom the romance of the girl's whole life was bound up, and whose departure closed, as it seemed forever, the chapter of love in her heart.

One day Lord Bainton grew suddenly better. The doctors began to smile and to prophesy great things, and there was a general air of revival and of satisfaction on every face in the house.

"We must get him abroad, Lady Bainton," said Sir Augustus to her. "As soon as ever he is well enough to travel you must take him to the South—it will be everything for him to escape the cold east winds of our English spring."

"And you think he is really better, then, Sir Augustus?"

"There is a marked improvement in his condition."

"Do you believe that it will last—that the improvement will be permanent?" she persisted.

"His lordship has a remarkably fine constitution," replied the physician, evasively not meeting his questioner's eyes.

"Sir Augustus, I want you to tell me something," said Helen gravely, laying a detaining hand on his coat-sleeve. "I want you to be honest. Once before you were painfully—I might almost say brutally—honest to me."

"Lady Bainton, I entreat you to forget that occasion. I owe you a thousand apologies for my conduct, and I

frankly own now that, having been a daily witness of your devotion to your husband, I see that I made a grave and unpardonable mistake concerning you."

"Pray do not apologize, Sir Augustus. You believed you were doing your duty, and I honored you even then for your frankness. But I want you to be as frank with me now. You told me then that my husband was the victim of a fatal disease—of one, I understand you to mean, that was incurable—was not that so?"

He nodded.

"Have you seen any cause to alter your opinion since then? Are you sure that the disease exists, or if it does that you cannot overcome it?"

After a moment or two of painful silence Sir Augustus answered, with an effort—

"I have unfortunately no grounds to alter my opinion, Lady Bainton. Your husband's disease is a mortal one, and must one day have a fatal termination; but his constitution is a fine one, and he might—mind, I do not say he will—but he *might* live for some time."

"What do you imply by 'some time?' " asked Helen, who had turned white to the lips at this verdict.

"A year—perhaps. Possibly two. Not more."

She bent her head with a little catch in her breath. Sir Augustus grasped her hand. "You must be brave, and you must do your best. Take him abroad—he will enjoy it, and it will revive him for the time. Make his life as pleasant to him as possible; there is nothing else to be done for him. For you, my dear lady, tell me if there is anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," she answered, after a pause. "Do me one kindness. Write to Lord Bainton's sister, Lady Camilla Greyson, at Old Park House, and tell her what you have just told to me. I should like her to know the

truth, and she has treated me so unkindly that I do not wish to write to her myself."

"I will do so to-night without fail. And I will tell her at the same time that her brother could not possibly be in the hands of a better or tenderer nurse than his wife."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LADY CAMILLA had gone back to Old Park with a somewhat unaccountable haste. All at once she seemed to Mr. Scarsdale to cease to take any interest in her brother's will, and to be no longer eager to hunt up evidence that might in the future help her to dispute it.

"I have come to the conclusion that it would be difficult and dangerous to do anything," she told the solicitor; "and, unfortunate and deplorable as things are for poor Ted, I don't suppose they can be helped."

Mr. Scarsdale was dreadfully disappointed. It had promised to be a very nice little business for him, and he had looked forward to his share of the costs of the case with the greatest satisfaction.

"It's mean of her," he thought, "d—d mean! She grudges the money. She was always a close-fisted one."

And then he did his best to try and make her change her mind and to reawaken her keenness in the matter.

But it was all in vain. For some incomprehensible reason Lady Camilla did not seem to care any more about it. She went back to Old Park and told her Tom that it was impossible to find out whether Bainton had altered his will or not, and anyhow there was nothing to be done. Ted must take his chances, like other people.

Whereat Tom, who was a peace-loving man, chuckled and said that he had told her so from the first.

Mrs. Torrington did not come back with Lady Camilla. On the day her cousin paid the hotel bill and packed up her boxes Dora declared that she was not

tired of London yet, and removed herself and her belongings to a lodging in Ebury Street.

Lady Camilla could not quite understand her. It is true that she had not had much time or opportunity to inquire into her doings, having been too much taken up with her own affairs and her daily journeying to Lincoln's Inn Fields; but still she was dimly conscious of the fact that the fair Dora was playing some little game of her own, in which she, Camilla, had no part or share.

She had been given an abridged and very much garbled account of the final severance with Gilbert Nugent and of his departure for the antipodes.

"Oh I am glad he is gone!" declared Dora carelessly. "I have come to your conclusion, Camilla, that the thing had lasted long enough. I went, of course, to wish him good-by, poor fellow, as he was going away so far. But really I felt quite glad he was going. He talked a great deal of nonsense about his love for me, and he actually wanted to get a license and marry me off at once, within twenty-four hours, so as to carry me away to New Zealand with him."

"Did he really? I should not have believed it possible that Gilbert could have desired such a thing," remarked Lady Camilla dryly.

"Yes, he did, my dear. A mad idea, was it not? And, of course, I couldn't agree to such a proposition for a moment. And then he said he should come back and make me his wife in three years. So foolish of him, dear boy!"

"Why, I always thought that was what you wanted, Dora."

"Oh no, my dear, not now! I see that he is very sincerely attached to me still; but it would not be fair

to keep him waiting any longer, so I told him it must be farewell forever, and he had better settle and marry out there. I had a dreadful scene with him—he sobbed, Camilla, positively sobbed; it was a terrible wrench to him. But there! I am glad I have broken it off, and I feel sure I have done what is right,” she added piously.

Lady Camilla was free to believe or to doubt as much of this story as she chose; but as a matter of fact she never heard any other account of what had taken place, and it was only by reason of her innate knowledge of her cousin’s character and peculiarities that she came to any conclusion whatever upon the subject.

So she went back alone to Old Park, and Mrs. Torrington remained in Ebury Street, and she failed entirely to extract any reasons out of her for her refusal to return with her.

“She is up to some new mischief, I’ll be bound,” thought Lady Camilla. “Trust Dora for that. She will never leave off her plans and intrigues till she is in her coffin.”

As to Lady Camilla, she resumed her quiet and uneventful life as the wife of a country squire, with her ordinary serene sense of self-satisfaction.

She ordered her household, visited her poor people in the village, discussed the Easter doles with the clergyman, and went on her little round of social duties with all her usual calm and orderly regularity. Her conscience, strange to say, did not trouble her in the very least as to a certain action of hers in Mr. Scarsdale’s back office.

Why should it trouble her? She had righted a wrong. She had made straight that which had become crooked; she had exercised the right of a deeply injured parent to work for her child’s benefit.

If she ever thought about it at all, it was in this light that it presented itself to her mind.

In course of time she received Sir Augustus Rolls's letter concerning the state of her brother's health. As a matter of fact, Lady Camilla had long suspected the serious symptoms which had only recently developed themselves in his case; and she had always been of opinion that hunting and shooting, which of late years had become a great effort to him, were very bad for him. It was not so great a shock as it might be supposed for her, to hear that his complaint was incurable. The letter told her also of Lord Bainton's immediate improvement, and of his departure with his wife for the South of France.

"So far all is well," thought Lady Camilla, with satisfaction. "Poor dear Bainton! It is very sad, of course, but now he has been fooled in his old age by that wretched girl, he is lost to me as a brother. I could never consent to meet her, or regard her as a sister-in-law. It is just as well that he should be out of England. Perhaps he will die abroad, and then Scarsdale will look for the will, and it will not be forthcoming. Of course, as he would be the first person to be blamed, he will not say a word—he will declare that he knows of no other than the one that is there, and that nothing else was ever confided to his care. She will be abroad—she will learn that there is nothing left to her; and that will be the end of it. Yes, certainly, that was a bold and clever stroke of mine. I don't believe I shall ever have reason to regret it."

One day, however, her serenity and peace of mind were broken up in a very unexpected manner. She was sitting sipping her tea one afternoon in the old oak-panelled hall, and smiling to herself as she counted

up the days to the now fast approaching Easter holidays, when her dear Ted would be coming home again, when the butler came to tell her that "a person" was wishing to see her who had come to the back door.

"What sort of person, Grant?"

"An elderly person, my lady."

"What does she want?"

"She will not state her business, my lady. She says it is private and confidential, and can only be told to your ladyship."

"Hum! I am rather suspicious of women who want to see me on business. Does she look like a beggar, Grant?"

"Oh, dear, no! my lady; not in the least. She is very handsomely dressed in a black silk gown and a velvet mantle."

"All a blind, very likely. However, I have nothing to do just now, so I will see her if she likes."

Presently the "person," who was decidedly elderly and stout, was ushered in.

Lady Camilla put up her long-handled eye-glasses to look at her, but was sure that she had never seen her in her life before.

"You wish to see me? What is your business, pray? And, first, tell me what is your name?"

"My name is Hogan, my lady. I had the honor of nursing your ladyship's brother, the Earl of Bainton, through the greater part of his recent illness."

Lady Camilla sat up.

"Come nearer, please. I can't see you. You can take a chair. Well, Mrs. Hogan, what has brought you to see me? Does my brother owe you any money?"

"Certainly not, my lady. I was paid my money

punctual, and I should never have taken the liberty of troubling you upon a paltry matter of money."

"What is it, then?"

"It is a communication, my lady, as I have to make to you—a communication of great importance, and as has lain on my conscience ever since I left his lordship's service."

And then the woman looked at her fixedly and meaningly. Lady Camilla laughed, and reached out her hand to her writing-table drawer.

"And for this 'communication,' I suppose you want to be paid, Mrs. Hogan?"

"If you please, my lady?"

"How much is it worth?"

"Twenty pounds."

"Great heavens! Twenty pounds? Are you mad? You don't suppose I am going to give you twenty pounds?"

"Very well, my lady. You can take it or leave it as you like." And the woman got up as though to go.

"There can be nothing within your knowledge that is worth twenty pounds to me," said Lady Camilla doggedly. And then she thought about her brother's last will and how she had consigned it to the flames in Mr. Scarsdale's office, and felt secure in her own position.

"Ah, well!" replied Mrs. Hogan, with an airy wave of her hand; "in course it's not for me to say to the contrary. Every lady knows her own affairs best, I dare say. But all I says, my lady, is that when a nurse as has the charge of a sick gentleman is made to wake him up out of a nice, healthy sleep in order that he may be made to write his own name down upon a sheet of paper—"

"What!" exclaimed Lady Camilla, springing to her feet excitedly. "What on earth are you talking about, woman? You are dreaming!"

"Oh, very well, my lady: perhaps I am dreaming, and perhaps I have nothing at all to tell you. I had better go and think," said Mrs. Hogan, with offence.

"No, no!" cried Lady Camilla soothingly, motioning her to a seat. "Don't go. Sit down, pray. I—I want to hear all about it very much—very much indeed, I assure you. Tell me at once what you mean."

Mrs. Hogan sat down, and a broad smile spread itself over her fat countenance.

"I'll sit down with pleasure, in course, my lady; but as to telling you, why that depends upon whether you are going to give me what I ask. I must have my money, you know, or else I shall keep what I know to myself."

There was a moment of indecision in Lady Camilla's mind. She put up her hand to her face—a torrent of confusing thoughts rushed tumultuously through her head. After all, what *could* the woman have to say that she did not know already? Was it worth twenty pounds to be told that Lord Bainton had made a will in his young wife's favor, cutting out her son entirely, when nobody on earth knew so well as she did how powerless that will had now become?

And then Mrs. Hogan played her last card.

"Of course, when a gentleman signs two wills on the same morning——"

"*Two* wills!" almost shrieked Lady Camilla.

"And when you listens—as in duty bound a nurse should, behind the door—and you hears the poor gentleman saying to a lady as has no experience of nursing the sick, 'I've no wish to do as you tell me. I only

sign this under strong pressure.' And then her new ladyship, as has no idea how dangerous it is to agitate an invalid, calls me in to sign my name."

"My God!" gasped Lady Camilla. "You mean that after the first will he signed another—a second one—a codicil?"

"I don't know as that wasn't the name of it, my lady."

Lady Camilla flew to her secretaire, dashed open a drawer, drew out a check-book, and filled in a check for twenty pounds.

"There, there!" she cried, breathlessly, and pale as death. "Take it—take it, and now tell me all! Oh! to think of such wickedness—such cruel wickedness! Tell me everything you know—everything you heard and saw. A codicil! Oh! great heavens! A codicil may undo everything! It may ruin all! A codicil! My God! A codicil!"

And then, overcome by such emotion as she had never experienced before, Lady Camilla, for the first and only time in the whole course of her life, fell back in her chair, and fainted dead away.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DORA TORRINGTON sat by herself in her gloomy little lodging-room in Ebury Street, with her feet upon the fender, her eyes upon the fire and an open letter in her hands.

It was not for nothing that the fair widow had condemned herself to three weeks of Mrs. Blenkinsopp's "dining-room floor," with the horsehair sofa and arm-chairs in the parlor, and the meagre deal-painted appointments of the bedroom behind it; not for nothing, assuredly, that she had endured ill-cooked soles and chops for dinner, and greasy slices of tepid bacon and weak tea for breakfast. She, who loved luxury and comfort and Marshall's high-class cookery, would assuredly not have uncomplainingly endured these various discomforts had not she been sustained through all by high hopes and lofty ambitions.

And now, at last, the battle was fought—the prize was won, and the game was hers!

The letter that laid the heart, the hand, the fortune of Mr. Onesimus Bloggs at her feet was actually in her possession. Not five minutes ago the postman had dropped it in the letter-box, and Mrs. Blenkinsopp had brought it in to her upon a battered japanned tray.

No wonder that Dora's untasted bacon was slowly congealing in its own fat—that her watery tea stood getting cold, and her flabby toast was untouched.

Was she glad, or was she sorry? Glad, that she had laid out so many shillings in going backwards and for-

wards to the Cromwell Road—shillings which she could so ill afford, but which had brought her in so munificent a return! Or sorry, that all her hopes and dreams and vague longing after love and happiness were merged at length into the prosaic person of Onesimus Bloggs?

Bah! what a name it was! Onesimus Bloggs! Mrs. Onesimus Bloggs! Yours sincerely, Dora Bloggs! She repeated it over and over to herself in all its aspects; but there was no getting over it at all—it was horrible!

And she, who had been proud of her pretty name—of the good old family ring in the word “Torrington”—and who had longed only to alter it into the equally euphonious one of Nugent. It was a come-down, indeed, to—Bloggs!

She shuddered as she dwelt upon it.

But, then, there was the money. And money, as we all know, like charity, covers a multitude of minor sins.

The money, in this case, was right enough. She had no doubts there. She had been very careful; she had precipitated nothing, and she had watched her man with the utmost caution.

She had gone in the first instance on the strength of her primary invitation in the train to visit the picture gallery, in order to inspect the Turner sketches. Perhaps, but for Gilbert Nugent's repudiation of her, she would have forgotten Onesimus Bloggs entirely; perhaps, had she been able in any fashion to win him back, the little red-headed gentleman, who had pressed his attentions upon her on the journey to town, would have passed out of her memory altogether. But when, stung with mortified vanity, and smarting under the lash of Nugent's cruel words, she had turned her back upon

him forever, there had come upon her such a rage of reckless fury—such a wild desire to throw herself into anything that should soothe and restore her shattered self-esteem—that she fell upon the first thing that came into her head with a sort of hungry avidity. She would not go mourning for Gilbert Nugent, she swore to herself; she would show him how little she cared; and she would show the world that she was independent of him.

And so in this hour of her baffled hopes she bethought her of Mr. Bloggs's card, and despatched a little note to the address in Cromwell Road, which filled the small soul of the little millionaire with delight.

When she got there she perceived at once that Mr. Bloggs must be a very wealthy man. The large, well-appointed house—it was, in fact, two houses thrown into one—the powdered flunkies, the rare and beautiful antique furniture; buhl and Chippendale and Louis Quinze of priceless value; the rich and costly hangings and carpets, and the pictures themselves, which she had ostensibly come to see, all proclaimed her host to be not only a man of money but also a man of taste. She had taken everything in minutely, although discreetly, with her sharp and experienced eyes. Then she accepted an invitation to lunch, and had been introduced not only to Mr. Bloggs's excellent French cook and unimpeachable wine, but also to his sister, Lady Mullins, an ex-lady mayoress, invited by her brother to play propriety for the occasion.

Lady Mullins had been graciousness itself—had coaxed, and caressed, and flattered her, and, in a post-prandial moment of confidence, expatiated to her on the grandeur of her brother's country place, and on the sorrow it gave her to see two such beautiful houses and such an ample fortune as "dear Onny's" without a mis-

tress at the head of affairs to make his homes cheerful and happy for him.

After that there had been frequent entertainments and festivities, at all of which Mrs. Torrington was an honored guest. Theatre parties and cosy little suppers afterwards, friendly dinners and stately banquets, all at the expense of Mr. Bloggs, were all evidently got up and arranged entirely and expressly for Dora's edification. And through these frequent meetings there ran always the undertone of the ex-mayoress's gentle recommendations. How much she wished that Onny would find a wife. How comfortable it would make him—he was so domestic—such a dear, good fellow; so sure to make a perfect husband. If only he could find some charming woman worthy of him—not a girl; girls would hardly appreciate him—but some clever, pretty, and still attractive woman of the world.

“She need not have a penny, dear Mrs. Torrington,” continued the affectionate and assiduous sister, warming with her subject. “Onny has more money than he knows how to spend—lucky fellow! But she must be a thorough lady, and a woman of sense and refinement, and she must be well connected and do credit to him. Ah! they are not so easy to find as you may fancy,” added the good lady, with a sigh, in answer to some murmured commonplaces which the widow managed to articulate somewhat consciously concerning the facility with which such ladies might be discovered. “A woman suited to make my dear brother happy will be a pearl indeed of great price; he is so fastidious, and his heart must go with his taste. Onny will never marry where he cannot love.”

And now at last, after three weeks of these prelimin-

aries, the millionaire had at length declared himself, and his letter of proposal was in her hands.

It was not a bad letter, take it altogether. If it was not particularly sentimental or poetical, it had the merit at least of being honest and straightforward. Mr. Bloggs had admired her, he said, from the first moment he had set eyes upon her in the railway carriage. He was looking out for a wife—he wanted a wife with looks and good family, whom at the same time he could be fond of. He knew he was not of exalted parentage—his father had kept a large wholesale warehouse at Clerkenwell—but he had had a good education, and he trusted that his dear Mrs. Torrington would overlook his humble origin, more especially as she already knew his sister, who was his only living relative, and who had on her part made a perfectly respectable marriage. And he wound up his letter by remarking that he wouldn't trouble her to write, but would call for his answer himself at an early hour.

And even as Dora was reading the letter over for the third time a brougham dashed up to the door, and a little, foxy gentleman jumped briskly out and rang the bell loudly.

For one moment of real pain and of bitterest regret the handsome form of Gilbert Nugent flashed madly back before her—Nugent, as he had looked when first she knew him, when his eyes had been full of love, and every tone of his voice a caress. “Oh, Gilbert! my love, my king!” cried the wretched woman, starting to her feet and wringing her hands together in impotent despair, whilst a mist of burning tears welled up into her eyes. Oh, why had she not been brave and true, then, in those old days, when his young heart had beat for her alone? Why had she put his honest love from

her with cold and selfish worldliness until she had taught him not only to weary of her, but also to despise her?

Ah, shattered dream of the past! Ah, wreck of all that was good and honest within her!

Too late now—too late! He was gone from her forever. It was not the ship that was bearing him away over the seas—not the lengthy abyss of distance that stretched every moment between them—but the great gulf between souls that have once been one, and that are now set apart forever by a mountain load of sin and error. That was what divided her for all time, into eternity itself, from the man whom she had first played with and then dragged down, and who had now escaped from her forever.

And the footsteps outside in the narrow passage drew near to her door. Another minute, and the anguish and poignancy of her useless regrets were at an end.

Mr. Onesimus Bloggs, smiling anxiously out of his watery little eyes, with his thin lips twisted nervously up under his straggling yellow mustache, stood before her with outstretched hands, awaiting her answer to his proposal.

Well! it was some small satisfaction an hour or so later to sit down and write her news to Lady Camilla—to describe her prospects in glowing colors—the magnificent house in Cromwell Road, the great wealth of her future husband; to dilate upon all she had heard of his beautiful place in Warwickshire, and to dwell upon the luxury and the splendor she meant to live in; of the entertainments she would give in town and country; of the manifold delights which the golden key of money was about to open to her. And then she was fortunate before she closed her letter to be able to add a description of the magnificent diamonds—two bracelets, a star,

and two rings—which Mr. Bloggs, with prompt generosity, ordered up as a token of his affection from his jeweller's as soon as ever he had gone away with Dora's consenting kiss upon his lips. The package arrived whilst Dora was still writing her letter, and added considerably to her pleasure and satisfaction in her decision.

“After all!” she said to herself, as she tried on the glittering jewels before the shabby little chimney-glass, and turned her fair head from side to side to admire their effect, “after all, money is a splendid thing—the best thing of all, perhaps; and if I am clever and play my cards properly I have no doubt I shall be able to pull Bloggs up with me into decent society, and we shall get on very well together. The world is very ready to welcome wealthy people. My friends will all like me very much better and make much more of me than they have ever done hitherto.”

Dora's intuition was right. Her friends, from Lady Camilla downwards, were delighted. They flooded her with congratulations and good wishes, and presently, when it was announced in the *Morning Post* how soon she was going to be married, they inundated her with wedding presents.

A month had scarcely gone by when, in the presence of a large and crowded assembly, an eminently fashionable wedding took place at St. Peter's, Eaton Square. The church was filled with well-known and titled people, and the soul of Onesimus Bloggs swelled with pride at the many illustrious persons who had gathered together to do honor to his bride.

The reception afterwards at the Alexandra Hotel, given and presided over by Mr. and Lady Camilla Greyson, was a gay and brilliant assembly; and Mr. and Mrs. Onesimus Bloggs went off on the first stage of their

honeymoon amidst the vociferous cheers and hearty blessings of a large crowd of well-dressed persons, most of whom had never seen the bridegroom, and hardly ever seen the bride before, but who all promised themselves henceforward to become their best and most intimate friends.

Such is the power of money! And such the foundation of friendship in the hearts of that sordid multitude who, until the end of the world, shall flock in countless numbers to the worship of the Golden Calf.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE marble villa upon the shores of the Mediterranean lay silent as death under the star-spangled vault of sapphire blue. The moonlight flooded the long steps of the terrace and the slender columns of the veranda with an unearthly whiteness, and there was not a breath of wind to stir the drooping wreaths of vine and of jessamine that trailed their graceful festoons all over the façade of the house.

The windows stood wide open, for it was April, and already the warm southern sun had changed the breath of spring into a foretaste of summer balminess. All day long it had been hot and breezeless, whilst even now the scent of a thousand flowers hung heavy on the air.

From the long French windows opening upon the terrace the yellow light of the lamps within streamed out in narrow streaks and lay across the grass. Within the room no one was stirring. Only the lamps, with their light-colored paper shades, and the pretty objects of china and silver, and the embroideries and photograph frames, and vases of flowers scattered upon the tables, betrayed the dainty appointments of a woman's room.

Behind the shadow of the clump of mimosas on the little lawn outside a youth stood watching the house. And as he watched he saw at length the slender form of a white-robed woman come slowly through an inner door into the warm-lit drawing-room. She looked tired and sad, and there were great circles round her eyes that

told of tears and of sleepless nights. She wandered round the room apparently in search of something, and as she turned from one to the other of the little tables the light fell fully upon her pale face.

"She doesn't look a bit different!" murmured the boy to himself; "only just wretched. I wonder why the mater says she is so bad, and has done so many wicked things? I don't think she looks a bit wicked—poor Nell! Only used up and dead beat," and then he walked quickly across the garden and went up the steps of the terrace.

The night was so still that Helen heard the footfall, and came eagerly forward. She stood at one of the open windows and peered intently out into the darkness, so that she saw the boy's dim figure as it came out of the moonlight into the shadow of the house.

"Ted!" she cried, in a ringing whisper. "Is that you?"

"All right, Nell—it is I. Am I in time?"

"Thank God, yes!" she answered, as she drew him into the room with both hands. "He has been asking for you all day long. I was so dreadfully afraid you would be too late."

"Oh, Nell! is it as bad as that? Is there no hope?"

She shook her head sadly. "He is dying fast," she answered brokenly.

Ted sank upon a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, Nell! he was always so good to me! Dear Uncle Bainton! Why, it seems only a few months ago that we were all out hunting together, you know, and he as jolly as ever you like, and enjoying it as much as anybody; and now to think he is dying! Oh, it's awful!"

"Dear Ted—don't cry. You mustn't, indeed, give way. He wants to see you so much, and it would upset him if you were to be like this. Just now he has

dropped into a doze; but he will wake soon. He never sleeps long—the pain wakes him up; and then I want you to come in to see him. He has done nothing but ask for you ever since I sent you the telegram.”

“I came off at once. The mater didn’t want me to go. She said—” And then he pulled up and stopped short.

“What did she say, Ted?” asked Helen, laying her hand upon his shoulder; and then, as he made no answer, she went on: “I am afraid I can guess. She told you that I was a bad woman, and had plotted to deprive you of your uncle’s favor, and that my telegram was nothing but a trick—”

“Why, Nell! how on earth did you guess?”

Helen gave a little mirthless laugh below her breath. “Ah! I am an enchantress, you see, Ted. And do *you* think me a bad woman, Ted, who only married your dear uncle to enrich herself at your expense?” And she took the boy’s chin in her hand as he sat in the chair below her, and turned his honest, ugly, freckled face up to hers.

“Dear Teddie, I wish you would trust me. You were my only friend when I first came to Old Park. I was so lonely and friendless. I should have been wretched without you. Do you suppose I’ve forgotten all those days, or that I could repay your brotherly kindness and sympathy by playing such a black, bad trick upon you? Did you ever know me do a mean and cowardly thing before?”

“No; you always did go as straight as a die across country,” admitted Ted, with generous frankness; “even the first day I took you out, when you were in such a devil of a funk, you never shirked it one bit, and a fellow that goes straight across country doesn’t go crooked

across life either. At least, that is my experience, Nell?"

Helen smiled at the characteristic simile. "Am I to understand then, Ted, that you believe in me, and trust me?"

Ted clutched her hand impulsively; "I trust you with all my heart, Nell."

"Even if things at first don't seem quite what you wish, you still won't lose faith in me?"

"Never, Nell. I won't believe a word of what the mother told me. It's not that I care about uncle's money one rap. I hope I am not such a cad as to care about money," added the boy loftily. "What hurt me was to think that you, who had sworn to be pals with me, and be like a sister to me, should be plotting and scheming to make uncle hate me and die without wanting to see me again. That's what's made me mad."

"Does it look like that—when I telegraphed to you to come out?"

"That's exactly what I said to the mother. But she wouldn't listen. She said you only did it as a trick, and that when I got here I should find you wouldn't let me see uncle, or speak to him."

Helen took Ted's hand and passed it under her arm. His honest candor made her very happy. The indignation with which he repudiated his mother's cruel accusations and suspicions of her endeared him to her.

"Come, then," she said to him, "we will go into his room at once, and you shall see for yourself whether I am such a monster as your mother makes me out to be."

Propped up upon his pillows, upon a narrow bed, the Earl of Bainton lay dying. There was no more recovery possible to him on earth. The gasping breath, the livid grayness of the drawn and altered features, the sunken

eyes, all told the same solemn story—he had not now many hours to live. Too weak to move even a finger—almost too weak to speak—still, there passed a smile of recognition across his face as his nephew, deeply moved at the sight of him, came forward and stood by his bedside.

The boy had never seen a death-bed before; he trembled and turned cold.

“Sit down, Ted,” whispered the sick man faintly. “I am glad you have come.”

Noiselessly Helen stole out of the room again, and left the uncle and nephew alone together.

For many minutes Lord Bainton said nothing, and Ted began to be afraid he must have lost consciousness, but the dying man was only thinking deeply—collecting all his remaining strength to say what he wanted to say to him.

Presently he began to speak—

“I dare say, my boy you think I have been an old fool to marry a young wife when I had one foot in the grave.”

“No, uncle, you had a perfect right to do as you liked,” answered Ted stoutly, his clear young voice ringing distinctly through the silent room.

The thin fingers closed one instant lightly upon his.

“Thank you, Ted. Well, it would be natural enough that I should leave everything to her. She is my wife. I love her; and you are not my son. My title becomes extinct with me, and you are not my heir in any sense of the word.”

“I know that, sir. I never looked upon myself as your heir, although my mother—”

“I know what your mother thought—and what she has taught you to expect. Perhaps it was natural enough. I should not have blamed her for it. I could have for-

given that. What I could not forgive was her treatment of my dear Helen. That I swore I would never forgive, either in this world or the next. Well, I made a new will; it was on my wedding morning—Scarsdale drew it up, and I signed it just before the ceremony. In it I left everything I possess on earth unconditionally to my bride, and only a very small legacy to you. Are you very angry, nephew?"

"No, sir; but I'm glad you left me a legacy. It was good of you to remember me at all at such a time."

"Well, Ted, that will will be acted upon the moment the breath is out of my body. Scarsdale has it. My wife is my sole residuary legatee. Venner, the parson, and Rolls, the doctor, are the executors. You are to telegraph to Scarsdale for that will the moment I am dead, and I trust to you to see that no obstacles are raised by your mother to the provisions of that will being carried out."

"You may trust me, uncle."

The fading eyes glanced at him quickly, and a little flicker of excitement revived in them as they did so.

"You don't care about the money then, Ted? You are not disappointed that you are cut out by Lady Bainton? Mind, I had made a will in '88 entirely in your favor. Scarsdale has got that, too, I suppose; but it's so much waste paper now. You are not disappointed?"

"I should be a hypocrite, sir, if I said I was not. Of course I would like to have lots of money—every one does, I suppose. But I repeat it,—you have every right to leave your money where you like; and I'm so fond of Helen. She is such a good sort, and I don't grudge her one penny of it."

The earl smiled feebly and pressed his hand once more.

"Well, my boy, you will perhaps find some day that

after all I've not done you so much harm. You must be patient, and you must wait, and if in time you find out anything to your advantage, why, remember when you do that it is not me you must thank, but Lady Bainton, who did it for you entirely of her own accord."

This speech of course was quite enigmatical to Ted. In fact his uncle's voice became so feeble as he concluded it, and his words came out one by one so haltingly, that he scarcely heard it all, or caught the gist of it.

He waited for a few minutes, but Lord Bainton's eyes closed, and he seemed too utterly exhausted to say any more.

Presently, after what seemed to Ted to be a very long time, his eyelids opened quickly, a sort of spasm passed across his features, and he gasped out hoarsely—

"Helen! Helen! Come to me."

Ted rushed to the door, and in another moment Helen, pale and breathless, flew swiftly in and sank on her knees by her husband's bedside.

He just knew her, put up his wasted hand for one moment to her face, whispered her name once more, and then sank back into an unconsciousness from which he never awoke again.

All night long they watched beside him—one on either side of the bed. He never moved, and only the labored breath, drawn sometimes at long and uneven intervals, told the watchers that he was still alive.

And just as the first rays of the rising sun fell in a glittering shaft through the half-drawn curtains across the chamber of death, John Edward Ravenstoke, sixth Earl of Bainton, with a long fluttering sigh in which there was no pain or terror, drew his last breath on earth, and was numbered with his fathers.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"My dear Ted, why on earth cannot you be reasonable and accept the situation?"

"Accept the situation! Why you must be mad, mother—quite mad, to suggest such a thing!"

Ted was stalking about the room, wild with excitement and agitation. Lady Camilla was seated calmly by the breakfast-table.

The scene was in a London hotel—the Metropole, whither Lady Camilla Greyson had come on the previous evening to meet her son on his return from Italy.

Ted was crimson in the face. He could not eat any breakfast; he could not sit still in his chair; he could only rampage up and down, and run his hands wildly and distractedly through his curly hair.

"It's impossible! impossible!" he cried, for the fiftieth time.

Lady Camilla shrugged her shoulders. "Not impossible at all—since it happens to be the case."

"But I tell you," cried Ted, stopping for a moment in front of her, "I tell you that my poor uncle told me so himself—he told me he had made a will leaving every single sixpence, with the exception of a small legacy to myself, to Helen; and that he had signed this will on his wedding day."

"Well, he must have destroyed it afterward, because there is no such will in existence."

"There *must* be. He said that Scarsdale had got it."

"The only will Scarsdale has is the one that is dated

1888, and which leaves you sole heir to your uncle's property, in trust to me until your twenty-first birthday."

"But when I tell you that he mentioned that other will to me also, and said it was now so much waste paper—"

Lady Camilla went on sipping her tea thoughtfully.

She was very angry with Ted. What business had the boy to interfere? Things had been arranging themselves admirably since her brother's death; everything seemed settling down quietly. The earl had desired to be buried where he died, without pomp or ostentation, in the sun-bathed English cemetery that overlooked the blue Mediterranean; and Ted, as was right and fitting, had stayed on, in order to follow his uncle's remains to the grave. The widow had stated her intention of remaining at the villa for the present, and of spending the whole summer in retirement among the mountains of northern Italy. Nothing could have worked better.

What Mr. Scarsdale's feelings had been when he unlocked the safe which had contained the last will and testament of his late client and realized that the most recent of the two wills had absolutely and utterly vanished, and that only one was left—the old one of two years back—may be conjectured, but will never be rightly known, because no one was present to overhear his exclamations of horror and dismay, or to witness the subsequent perturbation of his mind. But if his thoughts were inscrutable his actions were decided enough. What the much-perplexed and harrowed solicitor did was to telegraph to Lady Camilla, bidding her peremptorily to come to town. Lady Camilla, who had, of course, expected the summons, obeyed it, with, it must be confessed, a beating heart. She came up to

London by the first train, and drove straight from the station to Lincoln's Inn.

What passed there between herself and Mr. Scarsdale is also wrapped in mystery and obscurity; but Lady Camilla knew her man, and had been prepared to play her game with boldness and with decision. Anyhow, although the interview was long and at one time very stormy, it ended in peace and harmony. Mr. Scarsdale became, in the end, convinced that he would not be the loser by holding his tongue concerning an unfortunate transaction which Lady Camilla averred, with much solemnity, had been purely and solely accidental. She had, it is true—she confessed to him—found the key and examined the will, but it was really quite by chance that, bending over the fire to warm her frozen feet while she had been looking through her brother's papers, she had dropped one of them—at the time she hardly knew which—into the fender, where a red-hot coal that had appositely fallen out of the grate in the very nick of time, promptly and opportunely reduced it to ashes.

With this wonderful and far-fetched story the solicitor found himself compelled to be content, especially as in order to secure his discretion in the matter Lady Camilla transferred to him sundry bonds and railway stocks of which she had sole and undisputed possession. So that he was not left unrewarded for his reluctant promise of help and secrecy.

When this weighty matter was arranged, a further danger presented itself. Lady Camilla remembered Mrs. Hogan's revelation, and trembled; but as the days went on, and nothing happened, she began to breathe anew. An official letter, stating the existence of one will only—that of 1888—was written by Messrs. Scars-

dale to the widow on the Riviera, and was received by her just after Ted's departure. Of this letter she had taken no notice at all, nor had any rumors of a codicil reached the anxious ears of the two confederates at home; so that Lady Camilla began to share Scarsdale's opinion that Mrs. Hogan's story was nothing but a successful hoax in order to extort money. Everything therefore seemed to be working well when Ted came back and, by his impetuous and rash assertions and protestations, threatened to overturn all his mother's well-laid schemes.

"My dear Ted," she said to him, controlling with difficulty her rising temper, "you really are a child! Why do you interfere with things you cannot possibly understand? Leave everything to me, my dear."

"I am not a child—not such a child as not to understand what common honesty means. When a man with almost his last breath tells me that he has made such and such an arrangement, and that such and such a will exists—"

"My dear Ted, your poor uncle's mind must have been wandering. You say yourself he was in his last moments."

"His mind was no more wandering than yours is. He was perfectly clear and collected."

"But, Ted, there is *no* such will. What is the use of going on saying it when Mr. Scarsdale, who knew all your uncle's affairs, says he has not got any other will save the one of 1888. I am sure, instead of making all this fuss, you ought to be delighted. Your uncle always treated you as his heir, and you have every right to his money."

"I have no right to it, mother," cried Ted emphatically, "and, what is more, I will not touch one single

penny of it! I shall give it all back to Helen. It is hers; it ought to be hers."

"Really, Ted, you make me very angry," cried Lady Camilla, fairly losing her temper at last. "How can you be so childish and so silly? There is such a thing as law, as trustees, as all sorts of formalities which you have no control over at all at your age. How can you talk of giving your fortune away. It will not be yours till you are twenty-one."

"If I may not do that," answered the boy doggedly, "I will not at any rate spend one sixpence of it. There are neither laws nor trustees on earth that can force me to take what I know is not mine, and what I also know to belong to some one else."

"You are positively insupportable, Ted! Wait and see what Mr. Scarsdale will say to you. He will be here in a few minutes. Ah, here he is—punctual to the moment."

The hotel servant ushered the solicitor into the room.

"Good morning, Lady Camilla. Ah, my dear young friend, here you are back safe. Allow me to offer you my warmest congratulations upon your accession to wealth." And Scarsdale held out his hand to the young fellow.

But Ted held his hands resolutely behind his back.

"You need not congratulate me, Mr. Scarsdale, because I shall not take my uncle's money. He left it all to his wife."

"My dear Mr. Edward, no such will is in my possession."

"Very well—then, you had better institute a search for it," continued Ted decisively.

The solicitor looked uneasily at Lady Camilla, who was crimson with rage and mortification.

"Ted is very ridiculous," she said, with an attempt at playfulness; "he has all sorts of romantic and quixotic ideas. I think we must pack him off back to Eton, and manage his affairs without consulting him, Mr. Scarsdale."

Ted rounded on the lawyer with a sort of fury. "I am a boy now," he said sternly, "but I shall not always be a boy! I will not touch my uncle's money, because he has left it not to me, but to his widow; and because I promised him on his deathbed that I would stand by her and see justice done to her. And I swear before God, if you do not produce that will which Lord Bainton gave into your possession on his wedding day, that the very instant I attain my majority and am able to act for myself in the matter, I will have you arrested on a charge of conspiracy and foul play."

And then he swung himself out of the room, slamming the door loudly and angrily behind him.

Lady Camilla and Scarsdale were left looking blankly into each other's faces.

"This—is—is very unexpected!" stammered the lawyer, who had turned as white as a sheet.

Lady Camilla laughed shortly and angrily. "Don't be uneasy—leave him to me. That wretched woman has bewitched him evidently; but he will not be twenty-one for four years. I shall get him into a reasonable frame of mind long before then. What is more important just now is about that codicil. Have you heard from Lady Bainton?"

"Not a line. She evidently acquiesces. She has money of her own, you see. She probably imagines that he left her nothing at all. And the story of the codicil is, as I told you, a mere fabrication on the part of that nurse, in order to extract money from you."

“Wretched woman! I should like to give her in charge!” fumed Lady Camilla.

“Ahem! Better perhaps—your ladyship will excuse me for quoting the saying—‘Better let sleeping dogs lie.’”

Meanwhile Ted was striding away down the Strand to a certain humble lodging-house, with which he was familiar in his little London excursions, and where sometimes he had his letters addressed—bills he did not want his father to know of—and, perhaps, occasionally a little harmless love-letter or two.

Here he found awaiting him what he expected—a foreign letter; and, pouncing upon it greedily, he tore it open. When he had read it, however, he could not very well understand it.

Dear Old Ted:—Do not be unhappy when you hear about your dear uncle’s will. There has been some mistake, and I know that you will be horribly upset about it. But, perhaps, things will turn out differently in the end. Just accept everything for the present and keep quiet, and I want you to make me a promise. On the 10th of October it will be six months from the date of your uncle’s death. On that day I wish to see you. I shall arrive in England on the 8th or 9th, and will go straight to Portman Square, if you allow me to put up there for a few days. Now I want you to promise that you will meet me there on the 10th. I have something of great importance to tell you which must be told on that day. Meanwhile, God bless you, dear boy; continue to believe in me and trust me.

Your affectionate

HELEN.

Ted rushed into a post-office wildly, and with the impetuosity of his seventeen years sent off the following telegram—

"Will meet you, Portman Square, October 10th, but will not touch penny of your money."

And then, as he walked away leisurely down the Strand, on his way back to the Hotel Metropole, he said once again to himself in the terse vernacular of his age—

"But I'm blowed if I can see any meaning or sense in it, for all that!"

CHAPTER XL. AND LAST.

IF six months be a long space of time to look forward to, it is often marvellous how quickly it seems to have slipped away when we come to look back upon it, more especially if it has not been marked in our private history by any very exciting chances or changes of fortune.

To the principal characters of this story the six months that followed the death and burial of the last Earl of Bainton passed swiftly and monotonously away.

In London Mr. and Mrs. Onesimus Bloggs had spent a season of fast and furious dissipation, and were now recruiting their forces in the so-called seclusion of their country mansion, which was crammed from attic to cellar with a constant succession of guests. Dora had rushed ardently into the gay vortex of fashion. Her dresses, her diamonds, her equipages, and her entertainments had been the talk of the town and the joy of all those little society journals that delight in retailing the petty personal details of other people's concerns. The pretty Mrs. Bloggs was respectfully mentioned on all sides as a leader of fashion, whilst her ugly little husband, whom she dragged about everywhere in her train, and whose purse-strings she opened so widely, was systematically and significantly ignored altogether.

Far away in New Zealand, Gilbert Nugent, faulty hero as he has proved himself to be during the course of this story, was putting his shoulder manfully to the wheel and trying by hard work, by patience, and by penitence for the past, to render himself daily more

worthy of a certain golden hope which had dangled faintly and far away upon the distant horizon of his future ever since that hour when, in an old copy of the *Times* of many weeks back, his eyes had alighted by chance upon a certain important notice in the obituary.

Ted Greyson had also spent the six months in hard work of another kind. Ted had developed in a very short time into a man, and a very decided man, too. He refused to return to Eton; he refused to receive the ample allowance which his mother pressed upon him to take as his due; and he refused absolutely and utterly to live at Old Park or even to meet Lady Camilla at all.

Instead of leading the life of an idle young man of fortune, he begged his father to allow him to go to a private tutor who lived at a quiet village on the Devonshire coast, and who coached young men for the army and for the civil services. He was determined, he told his father, to enter a profession of some kind, and to earn his own living. "I know, sir," he said to him, "that you have been in pecuniary difficulties for a long time back, and I know that Old Park must soon be let or sold, and that I shall never be able to live as you have done upon the estate. I do not wish to be a burden upon you, and I want to make my own way in the world. If you keep me and give me the means of working for the next two years, I promise you that it shall not be my fault if I don't pass these examinations, after which, once started, I will never cost you another penny."

"I honor your independence, my dear boy, but for the life of me I cannot see the object of it," had been his father's reply. "Your uncle's will leaves you an ample fortune; your mother is in a position to make you a handsome allowance, and on the day you are twenty-one you will be able, if the fancy takes you that way,

to make ducks and drakes of about seven or eight thousand a year! Why, therefore, talk of a profession, or of working for your living?"

Ted was silent for a moment or two. His feelings against his mother was one of bewildered indignation. He could not understand her. He believed that Scarsdale had made away with the will for some reasons of his own; but it had not entered into his head to imagine that his mother was in any way a partisan in his wickedness. But he was deeply grieved and disappointed to think that she had been so ready to wink at a possible crime, and to take possession for him of a fortune to which she must know, at her heart, he had no right. Nevertheless, he did not wish to impugn her honor and rectitude to his father, to whom he had never disclosed his uncle's dying words—not caring to make possible trouble between his parents.

So he only said, very simply and quietly, "I do not want poor uncle's money, father. I have told my mother that I will not take it. It is my firm belief that he must have made some provision for his widow, and that some documents will one day come to light which will materially alter the position of affairs. I would, therefore, rather prepare to train myself to become a poor man."

So Ted had his own way, and went down to Devonshire, and worked hard among a number of other young fellows, much to the sorrow of his mother, who mourned over his absence and over what she called his "ingratitude" with the bitterest pain.

The Earl of Bainton's will was duly proved, and came into operation; but the money lay in the bank untouched, and accumulated there, and Ted took his small quarterly allowance from his father, and would have none of it.

Meanwhile, Helen, Countess of Bainton, had found a temporary home among the olive-clad slopes of the Italian mountains. Far below her pretty villa lay a village clustering among the green meadows and a placid lake of turquoise blue, while opposite her windows a long range of snowy Alps recorded the rising and setting of the daily sun to her in a succession of gorgeous and ever-varying panoramas. She was for a long time quite alone here with her servants; and she was very sad and dull. Often she mused sorrowfully enough upon the hard lesson which life had brought so bitterly home to her—of the small benefit that money brings—of its futility and of its utter powerlessness to give one hour of real peace or happiness to the soul.

“I had rather be a beggar and be loved, and have some one to love me, than be a millionaire and be without one true heart to rest upon!” That was the constant burden of her melancholy thoughts.

For what had her accession of fortune brought to her—that fortune which in her girlish ignorance a year ago had seemed to open every thing in life to her dazzled imagination? Bitter enmity—rancorous spite—false and mercenary friends—and of that love she needed so much only the faithful affection of one kind old man who was dead, and the impulsive partisanship of a boy who was too young to be of any real comfort to her.

And what of that other, who was so far away at the other side of the world? What of him whose love had been fraught with peril, and whose soul had only looked into her soul once, and that at the very moment of parting from her forever?

Was it likely that Gilbert Nugent, who had judged her so harshly and known her so little, would remain true to that transient gleam of a spoilt and wasted love?

"Men change so quickly," she thought, as she watched the red flush of sunset on the mountain tops pale and fade away into evening's blue and gray. "The first ardor of their feelings lasts such a little while! It is like that glow upon the Alps, that is so splendid for a little time, but that so soon is over. There! it is gone now—and all the glory of it is dead." And with a sigh she rose and closed the window through which the chill mists of the coming night were already creeping.

One day her servants told her that at the little hotel in the mountain village, where tourists in search of the picturesque, combined with the cheap, often came to stay, an elderly English lady lay very ill. Rejoiced to find something to arouse her out of her idle and useless existence, Helen hurried down the steep hillside to the hotel, and great indeed was her surprise to find in the sick lady no other than her old friend, Miss Fairbrother.

The old school-mistress lay upon a hard bed in a most uncomfortable little bedroom, and welcomed the sweet-faced young woman in her deep widow's weeds with positive rapture. In a few moments, holding her late pupil-teacher's hands eagerly in her own, she told her all her little history. She had given up her school at Aberdare house to her nephew and his new wife. "A very estimable person," she told her; "not young nor at all pretty, my dear, but sensible, and has a little money—her father keeps a large linendraper's shop in the city—and she will make Frederick a good wife, and be better suited to him, I dare say, than you would have been, my dear." And then she went on to say how she had thought she would set out and see the world before she died, and how she had been now travelling for some months with Sarah, the old housemaid from Aberdare

house, as a companion and maid; but somehow the food and the long journeys and the foreign wines, none of them agreed with her, and she felt very unwell and quite unable to proceed on her way.

Needless to say that in a very few hours Miss Fairbrother and her ancient abigail had been safely transferred to the comfortable villa on the mountain slope, where, under Helen's good care and nursing, the old lady speedily recovered her health and strength, and where it required but little persuasion to induce her to take up her abode altogether.

It seemed odd enough to Helen to be thus thrown back by the tide of fate into the closest daily contact with her old instructress. It made her feel sometimes as though time had gone back, and the past year had been a dream. Only that now it was she who guided and led, and Miss Fairbrother who depended upon her and could not do enough to express to Helen her gratitude and her admiration. Helen was decidedly the happier for this new interest in her life.

And so to them all the six months came to an end, and October began at last.

One morning Lady Camilla was surprised to receive a letter containing the formal compliments of Helen, Dowager Countess of Bainton, and requesting the presence of Mr. and Lady Camilla Greyson at 52 Portman Square, "To be present at a family meeting of great importance, on Thursday, the 10th of October." Mr. Scarsdale also received a similar notification, and so also did Sir Augustus Rolls, and Mr. Venner, the clergyman.

Great curiosity was awakened in the minds of all those who were thus mysteriously bidden to meet together in the unused town house which Lady Camilla persisted in

regarding as her son's, but of which he had resolutely refused to take possession. Lady Camilla telegraphed to Mr. Scarsdale for instructions, and Scarsdale telegraphed back that he feared some new and unforeseen event had arisen, and that decidedly it would be better to be present.

When the day arrived, therefore, Mr. Greyson and Lady Camilla repaired to London, and arrived in Portman Square at the appointed hour. The first person they saw on entering the great gloomy library was their own son standing with his back to the fireplace.

Helen, clad in deep weeds, rose with a bow at the entrance of her sister-in-law, but did not offer to shake hands with her. The three gentlemen had already arrived, and a fourth—a well-known solicitor employed as Lady Bainton's legal adviser—while behind them, in a shadowy corner, Miss Fairbrother, now formally installed as companion to the young widow, sat by, a silent witness of the proceedings.

When the new-comers had taken their places, Helen placed a small despatch-box upon the table and unlocked it.

"I have asked you all to meet me here to-day," she said, in her clear, sweet voice, "because I have a paper of great importance here, which, by solemn oath to my dear husband, I was unable to make public until six months after his death. It is a codicil to his last will," she added, raising her eyes and fixing them coldly and sternly upon Scarsdale, who grew livid under their significant glance—"the will," she added slowly and meaningly, "which he made upon the morning of our marriage, which he delivered into Mr. Scarsdale's keeping, and which has, oddly enough, never been found at all."

"I never had such a will," stammered Scarsdale. "It is entirely a mistake."

Helen waved her hand. "It is quite immaterial now, Mr. Scarsdale, whether it is ever found or no. May I trouble you to read this paper aloud?" she added, turning to her own lawyer, who was seated beside her. The solicitor stood up. Mr. Scarsdale bent his head and trembled. Lady Camilla lay back almost fainting in her chair, with her smelling salts to her nose.

The lawyer began to read: "I, Edward John Ravenstoke, Earl of Bainton, desires to add this codicil to the will I wrote this morning."

It is needless to follow the words in detail. They were, however, clear, and plain enough. After six months, during which the will of the morning was to have been acted upon, Lord Bainton, "by the special wish of my dear wife," left to her this house in Portman Square, with all its furniture, pictures, and plate; and of all the rest of his property one third; the remaining two thirds to stand in her name in trust for "my nephew, Edward Greyson," to be handed over to him unconditionally by her, on his attaining his majority. Until that date Helen was empowered to act for him and was appointed as his sole guardian and sole trustee of the property. The family diamonds were also to go to Ted, but were to be kept in the bank until his wedding day.

That was all. It was simple enough, and yet it was sufficient. It rendered Ted the undoubted proprietor of an income of four thousand five hundred a year, it left to the testator's widow the more modest yet perfectly adequate income of two thousand, and it took Ted entirely out of his mother's hand and placed him in Helen's.

Her revenge was indeed sweet! And when Ted flung himself on his knees beside her and kissed her hand in an outburst of affectionate gratitude she felt that she had gained all—and more than all—the reward she had worked for.

For who now could dare to call her mercenary and scheming? Somehow the room emptied quickly. Scarsdale and Lady Camilla—inexpressibly relieved to find that Lady Bainton had no intention of inquiring into the fate of the destroyed will—took themselves off together with a somewhat suspicious precipitation; and the others having shaken hands with her, she was left alone with Ted and with the lawyer who had undertaken to manage and arrange her affairs. He had been told nothing save that the will of which mention had been made was unaccountably lost, and suspected nothing of foul play.

“I shall stop here with you for a bit,” said Ted to her; “at least if you will keep me as a guest, Nell?”

“For as long as ever you like, my dear boy,” answered Helen smiling. “Your home is with me, you know, now, and Miss Fairbrother and I will be very glad of your company. I expect that Mr. Reeve”—turning to the lawyer—“will require us both in London for some little time yet, till all this business is settled.”

“You are a real brick and no mistake, Nell,” said the boy to her later, after Mr. Reeve had gone and Miss Fairbrother had left the room. “I was unutterly miserable before, for I felt I had no right to a penny of the money; but now I know it’s all right, and that I owe everything to you. I feel as happy as a sandboy. I wish, though, that we had gone shares alike,” he added with boyish simplicity; and then he bent down and

threw his arms impetuously round her neck and kissed her.

"Dear old Nell! Now I hope you may be very happy some of these days!"

"Perhaps I shall be," answered Helen with a smile. "Anyhow, Ted, your good wishes shall bring me—pluck—I think! and perhaps also—luck!"

Her precise meaning was somewhat enigmatical to Ted, who, however, went off whistling contentedly for a walk.

When every one had left her, Helen rose from her chair, went slowly upstairs and entered the little room half-way on the staircase where she and Gilbert Nugent had parted. She closed the door behind her and stood leaning against it for a long time buried in thought. It all came back to her; his grief, his love, his parting words, the very look in his eyes as he had turned to leave her. The whole scene seemed to be so vividly revived that it might have taken place yesterday. Presently—she knew not how or why—a conviction came to her that he loved her still, that he was thinking of her now, at this very moment. Her heart began to beat strangely. She went hurriedly to her own room and put on her bonnet. Half an hour later a telegraphic message flashed forth from a central post-office on the journey round the world.

"Come home—I want you," was what it said; and Helen knew, as she walked homeward again with a lightened heart, that that message would not be sent in vain.

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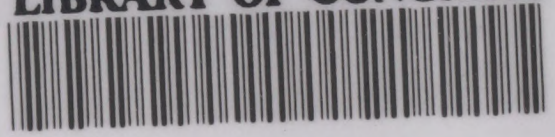
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